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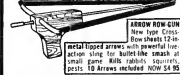
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PLANET STORIES



VOL. 6, No. 9

A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE

WINTER, 1954-55

Two Novels of Distant Worlds

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The unbeautiful, the aging, the glorious and far-voyaging Lucy B. Davenport hit the atmosphere with a long proud scream like a trumpet call, leaving behind her in the air a railing wake all glittering with stardust . . . and the fiercest challenge ever flung at a tyrant robot world.

THE VANISHER Michael Shaara 53

His was a strange and fabulous heritage that made him completely expendable. And so it was that Web Hiltan went out into space, and saw the uncovered stars, and the curiously naked alien, and became the first man in history to die more than once.

Five Star-flung Short Stories

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There are men who work and do not think, and men who think and do not work. Among the latter were Pismo Bates and Onско . . . and no Martian problem was too great for their glittering minds.

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In the minds of her creators there was no doubt of her effectiveness; she would conquer this planet; the armed might of Earth would vanish before her.

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Don your 'chute and join the sky-writers.

Cover Illustration by Algis Budrys

T. T. SCOTT, President

JACK O'SULLIVAN, Editor

MALCOLM REISS, Mgr. Editor

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THE VIZIGRAPH

More than a few queries have reached us lately asking about the reasons for the two-issue lag in letters now that *PLANET STORIES* has gone quarterly. Well, there are a number of reasons, but the main one deals with the time element.

Take, for example, this issue of *PLANET*. Although the on-sale date is December 1st, the printer desires to have all copy at his plant by September 1st which is the very day that the previous issue (Fall) goes on sale at your newsstand. Thus, unless I delayed matters for a week or two on getting copy to the printer, this issue would contain no letters relative to the Fall ish. (As you can see by reading some of the letters in these columns, I've been a naughty boy.)

Since there is nothing I'd like better than to have all letters in the *VIZIGRAPH* pertain to the previous ish, I'll continue to be a shade tardy with the printer if you folks play along by sending in your missives within the first week or two after the magazine goes on sale. This, of course, does not mean that letters arriving later will automatically be eliminated from the *VIZIGRAPH*. Not at all. Worthy of print, they'll appear bright and bold in the succeeding ish.

And just to spread this magazine's inimitable art work among the deserving, the following scribes are elected: 1) Paul Mittelbuscher; 2) Mrs. Richard Leek; 3) Val Walker.

OUT OF THE MORASS

1123 Cumberland Rd.
Abington, Penna.

Dear Editor,

Recently I took it upon myself to actually read one of those "abominable *PLANET* things." I'd heard so much about them that I said to myself—"Well, no magazine could possibly be as bad as all that"—so I gathered up my courage and rapidly glanced through the Fall issue, pausing only to observe the illos. Naturally, when I was through I needed far more courage, but when I saw that baccaver ad which informed me that "I could be a bombshell in any tough spot"—I carelessly tossed all caution to the winds and advanced unhesitatingly through the first 50 pages or so only to find myself very much surprised. . . . And why was I so astonished???? . . . Simply because (assuming that Fallish is an accurate representation of the average quality of PS) I discovered that *PLANET STORIES* wasn't nearly as bad as you and your readers make it out to be.

Let me say, however, that you have done a handsome job of disguising this publication as one of the worst in science-fiction, and therefore, as one of the very worst in the entire world. You have succeeded admirably in consistently plastering the most downright repugnant and frightful paintings on your covers and skillfully supplementing this with an extremely deplorable reputation.

Generally the same ghastly elements may be detected in all of your covers—True, they're not usually triangle jobs. What they are I don't know and I'm at a loss to apply a geometrical term to them, because I've never devoted more than five consecutive seconds to analyzing one.



I do, however, admire Freas' interior work very much, but how the more intelligent frequenters of LA VIZI can set about making correspondingly intelligent efforts to evaluate moronic Freas covers, which are governed solely by the dictates of a decadent editorial policy, is a mystery which will always remain totally unfathomable to me.

Before I move on I would also like to inject some praise for Freas' excellent use of color. Sure, lousy and lewd, but oh so vivid.

As for the Fall fiction which I was so pleasurably surprised over—without exception, without question it was undeniably the best I have read in any recent comparable pulps. (That last one ought to provoke a reserved grin, maybe even offset the unflattering remarks above).

This realization sets me to wondering about the multitudes of downtrodden people, the common rabble who have begged and implored me to mercifully relieve them of their copies of PS. Yes, PLANET STORIES—a blemish on their life, a barrier to peace, happiness and normality. About the man I witnessed hurtling from the Delaware Bridge yesterday, quietly cursing the copy of PS that fluttered down after him. And, too, about the vast hordes of gibbering idiots I have observed at the local sanatorium flapping violently through the coarse pages of PLANET. (No I don't, either, I just go there to give them my old copies). Maybe if these poor despondent people would ignore their traditional distaste of the magazine, overcome their years of conditioning, inhibit their mental inhibitions and actually read a story or two (those of them that can read) instead of merely hysterically scanning the cover and turning in the verdict. Then perhaps they would discover that fandom's "own select whipping" boy is oftentimes quite bearable.

In any event, should they decide to explore an issue one of the following reactions would most surely be produced. (1), All previously established concepts of PS would abruptly be knocked out from under immediately plunging them into the abyss of permanent and irrevocable insanity; (2), Of course, some of them will favor what they read and thence proceed to digest everything between the covers. This will bring them lickety-split right up to the bacover whereupon they will spy the inevitable bombshell ad. Needless to say, when people suffer delusions to the extent that they sincerely believe they are bombshells it is quite a definite symptom of severe mental imbalance. As this mental ravage progresses and advances, the victim suffers all sorts of hallucinations—occasionally thinks he's a torpedo, at other times a 40-40 howitzer shell. As a safety measure, it is expedient to retire to the family bomb-shelter when the victim is transformed into a lithium bomb, or even one of those obsolete A-bombs. Victim is often subject to violent fits of temper (blowing his top). Obviously, these sorely afflicted cases are best removed to the proper institutions (their PS copies still clutched convulsively in their fists; (3), Or they might be ensnared in the merry convolutions of LA VIZI to become one of the real rollicking screwballs that are permitted to run around free.

What's this I hear???? . . . Someone who doesn't believe we're all Luna-tics??? . . . Somebody who thinks fans are just ordinary people??? . . . Says differently right in the Sept. 6 issue of TIME MAG. Most every fan is content to dwell and revel in the obscurity of reading science-fiction and participating in a few fannish activities, but it is a very rare occasion indeed when he considers himself guilty of "SCHIZOPHRENIC MANIFESTATIONS." Nevertheless we must bow our heads and accept the reality.

"Schizophrenic Manifestations"—oh, what menacing disease is this???

Anyway, that's Dr. Robert Plank's conclusion who recently slung all of protesting science-fiction on the couch for a psychiatric analysis. He has gathered, thusly, that all the authors are daffy for contriving the stuff and we are accredited with releasing steam from our own unconsciousnesses from reading it.

Of course, he doesn't come right out and say we're crazy or downright bats or anything—rather he thinks we're more in the line of queer outcasts. TIME and Mr. Plank crown their shocking declamation with the supreme insult of all—"Science-fiction may be bad science and worse fiction, but to a good wig-picker it is a sensitive barometer of our changing mental climate!" This charge alone should be sufficient to begin some sort of a crusade to Cleveland where Plank hides out.

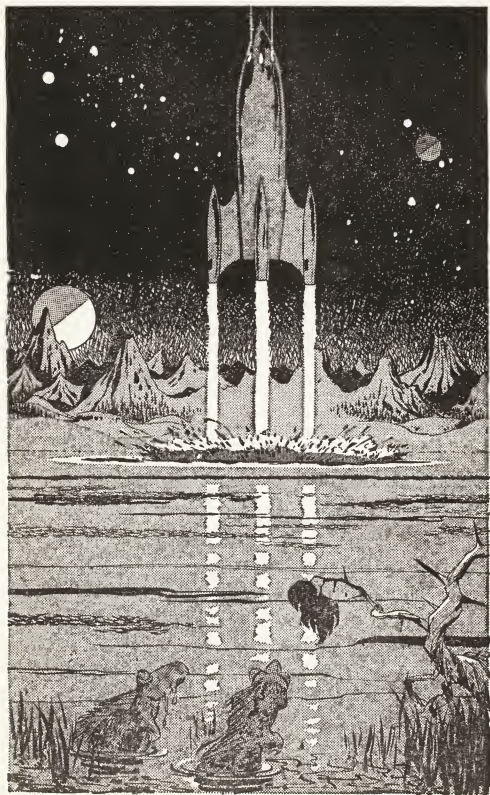
Best story this was THE TIME TECHS simply because it had a reasonable amount of length to develop a truly entertaining tale. The writing, although not distinguished, was easily adequate. Another exceedingly good entry was Sheckley's H ON H based on several very clever ideas. Also memorable were Marks' GEISHA MEMORY, McConnell's PHONE ME IN CENTRAL PARK, and Fox Holden's DOWN WENT MCGINTY. Of the remaining, though not comparable with the others, all were thoroughly enjoyable.

VIZI was engrossing as per usual, but if you think I'm going to produce the slipstick and the calculating machine merely to compute which inconsequential piece of rambling to term more meritorious, you are more of a crank than Plank. I would, however, like to make mention of "Fly-catcher" Fletcher and his very beautiful and poetic style of saying absolutely nothing. For this I think he deserves some sort of a hooby prize—maybe a swatter, or a "Big Sinko" fly trap or something. He needs one badly. Anyway, Jolin writes that he has "officially dropped out of fandom" (or so he says) so I guess we can really expect nothing from him from now on. Oh well, it's probably for his own good. Maybe this Plank fellow has something after all.

Here's a suggestion, Jack. Even if Planet is going to maintain the lurid pics and the general cheap format, you could probably sell a far greater number of magazines if you did something about your extremely poor distribution system. It's becoming exceedingly difficult to find PLANET displayed anywhere (and don't tell me they're sold as soon as they hit the stands). Even allowing for the under-the-counter sneak tactics the newsdealers are always pulling, I estimate that approximately 1 out of every 10 dealers who handles pulps also handles PS. This coupled with the fact that only about 1 out of 10 mag dealers handles pulps at all gives you a fair idea of what a grueling task it is to locate even a single copy of said magazine. Maybe conditions vary somewhat throughout the country, but for this local area I know I am fairly correct. Let's hope that you boys at Fiction House, or American News, or somebody, can do something to alleviate the situation.

One more thing worthy of note before I sign off—I've always recognized Vestal as a fairly proficient artist and certainly his P. 4 illo of this seems to bear me out. But always there is one striking imperfection which is immediately noticeable. Seems Herman can sketch virtually every part of the human anatomy infallibly, but when he comes to the female breast he falls flat on his face. As an impartial observer, I'd say that he's giving Christian Dior one helluva lot of stiff competition and what's more he

(Continued on page 87)



TELEPORTRESS OF ALPHA C

By LEIGH BRACKETT

The Lucy B. Davenport, the unbeautiful, the aging, the glorious and far-voyaging space craft, hit the atmosphere with a long, proud scream like a trumpet call, leaving behind her in the air a roiling wake all glittering with stardust . . . leaving behind her the fiercest challenge ever flung at the tyrant robot world.



KIRBY went slowly down the ladder to the cargo deck. Halfway on the iron rungs he stopped and looked out over the deck, and all the people that were in it looked up at him but did not speak, and even most of the children were still.

Kirby said, "We'll land within the next two hours."

Five years. Nearly six, as Earthmen count time. Five years, nearly six, in the huge cold night that lies between the suns. And now there were only two short hours left between them and the realization of a dream.

He knew what they were thinking, sitting there in little huddles on the rows of cots, trying to keep the children safe and quiet, waiting, watching him. They were thinking, What if something happens now, at the last minute? What if all this time and distance has been for nothing, and we die?

A burst of thunder drowned out all other sounds, and the *Lucy B. Davenport* shuddered in all her iron bones. The people swayed, and Kirby could see their mouths come open, but he could not hear anything but the rockets. Everything that was not bolted down moved forward along the deck or through the air. Easing himself on the ladder, Kirby glanced with a fast professional eye at the preparations that had been made, and then he looked for Wilson and found him.

"Better secure the doors of the galley lockers, Wils. If the catches tear off, you'll have the place full of pots and skillets. And there's a wash line over there—" he pointed—"just set to wrap around someone's neck. Otherwise everything looks good."

Wilson nodded. He was a young man, but he looked a hundred years old at this minute, his eyes haggard and very bright. Kirby knew what he was thinking, too. He was wishing he didn't have to sweat through these next two hours. He was wishing the landing was already over and made, and safe.

You have to sweat through the landing, Kirby thought, and you think it's tough. How about me? I have to make it.

"Get with it," he said to Wilson. "And watch out for the next blast." Wilson turned and beckoned to four other men. They talked a minute and then they threaded

their way between the cots to the galley where the women had done their cooking for nearly six years now and got busy with part of a coil of wire they had left from securing other things. A woman got up and rather shamefacedly took down her wash line, Kirby thought, Wash lines and diapers, stew-pans and soap and a smell of sour milk, and that's how you conquer the stars.

He said aloud, so they could all hear him, "The brake blasts will come closer together now, so don't try to move around. Watch the kids." A note of gentleness, almost of pity, came into his voice. "And don't worry. You'll hear a lot of noise, and the ship may pitch around a good bit, but there's nothing to be afraid of."

Somewhere, anonymous in the concealment of blanket-and-pillow padding, a girl was making the sharp barking noises that precede hysteria. Nervous excitement, rather than any real fear. Some of the children, frightened by the roar and the jarring, were beginning to cry in earnest. Kirby shook his head, "Try and keep them quiet," he said, and went back up the ladder.

He closed the hatch and dogged it down. Scared, he thought, why should they be scared? They don't know all the things that can happen on a landing. They don't realize how old the *Lucy* is, a tired old freighter already pushed far beyond her strength. She could blow her tubes. She could break up. She could misfire and plain crash.

Kirby watched his own hands fastening the hatch. What about those hands? Could they still take a ship down, could they remember after all these years the thousand intangible things a pilot's hands must know, the timing and the feel and the balance of a ship?

The all-important hands made three tries on the last dog before they could get it set.

Kirby went on to the bridge.

Pop Barstow was in the pilot's chair, an old rocket man like Kirby, only Pop was too old. Kirby wished he wasn't. He wished he could leave the whole responsibility with Pop.

"Hold on," said Pop. "I ain't through yet." He punched the keys again, and they held on—Kirby, and Shaw the radarman in his cubby, and Shari, who was standing beside the pilot's chair. The roar and the shud-

der came again, and the great hand of inertia slamming at them, and Kirby's ears hurt with trying to hear the individual creakings of the ship's fabric through the noise of the rockets. When things were quiet again he cursed Pop Barstow. "What're you trying to do, break her back?"

"Her back's in better shape than mine," said Pop. He slid over into the co-pilot's chair. "And anyway, young Kirby, I was flying rockets when you were kicking in your cradle. Haven't got a bottle hid away, have you?"

Kirby took the controls as though they were so many sticks of dynamite. "Hell," he said angrily, "you soaked up every drop there was three years ago."

"Pity. Best thing in the world for what you've got." He looked up at Shari. "Funk," he said. "That's what this husband of yours has got, last-minute, end-of-the-run funk. Trouble with these young fellows now, no stamina. You'd think after everything else that a simple little landing wouldn't upset him." He shook his head slowly. "Fellow that beat out an R-3 patrol for take-off, fellow that wrecked a robot star-ship in full flight, fellow that could get a tub like this one here all the way to Alpha Centauri—you wouldn't think it."

Kirby said between his teeth, "Thanks, Pop, but I'd rather you left my morale alone."

He punched the keys. When it was over Pop said quietly, "You'll have to give her more than that unless you figure on driving her right through the planet."

KIRBY did not answer because he knew that what Pop said was true. He looked out the forward port. The glare-shields were drawn, but even so the two suns, Alpha Centauri and the more distant companion, flooded space with a brilliance that was gloriously painful to the eye after the years of darkness. In that sea of light a planet swam, green and lovely and very like Earth, as Alpha Centauri is very like Sol. And Kirby's heart contracted with a pang of mingled pain and exultation.

Shari spoke suddenly over Kirby's head. She spoke in the old High Martian which was her native tongue, and which Kirby had learned long ago because of her. She

said, "I will put it into words for you, Kirby. Your dream ends with the landing. It is sad, but there is no help for it."

"There are times," said Kirby, "when it would be better for me if my wife were neither a telepath nor a talker." And then he asked her what the devil she meant by that statement.

"The others broke the law and risked the robot-ships of the Government to make this flight because they dreamed of a world where thought and action should be free, and not forever chained by Government decree. You, beloved, you thought highly of those things too, but it was only a thought. Your dream was to go to space again, to hold a rocket ship between your hands once more before you died. So now you have done it, and your dream ends, and theirs begins."

She leaned over and kissed him, quickly, gently, and turned away. "Let it be enough that you are the first spaceman to span the stars. A big thing, Kirby, a very big thing, but no good without a landing. Make it."

She went out of the bridge before Kirby could think of any adequate words. He sat for a minute watching the planet rush up to meet him, furious because of the implications in what she had said and at the same time wondering if she could be right, and then all he could think of was the men and women and kids down there under hatches with their lives depending on him, and how scared he had been at the take-off for the same reason. Then he really got mad. He said aloud, "I'll show her." He hit the brake-jets again, and again, and a third time in close succession, hard, and he said to the *Lucy B. Davenport*, "All right, you old cow, if you're going to break up do it now!"

And he repeated, "I will show her!"

In the co-pilot's chair, Pop Barstow grinned a fleeting, nervous grin. He braced his feet as though he meant to push them through the deck plate, and waited.

Kirby took her down. Part of the time he knew what he was doing, and part of the time his hands and his eyes teamed up and worked by themselves, getting messages from the instrument bank and from the deep inner pulse of the ship and combining them into a single truth expressed in terms of velocity and thrust.

Kirby knew where to land. They had chosen the spot from what had been seen of the data brought back by the RSS-1—to a robot ship, bitterly enough, belonged the honor of the first interstellar flight, and the only consolation Kirby had for that was that he and Shari and three other paltry humans had managed to leave RSS-1 a drifting wreck in the interstellar deep, with its set purpose of destroying the *Lucy* and her illegal voyagers forever unfulfilled.

The information brought back from that reconnaissance flight had been kept secret, but not secret enough. Knowledge of a habitable world in the system of Alpha Centauri had sparked this whole odyssey of the *Lucy Davenport*, and on one clip of smuggled microfilm a place had been shown that looked well-nigh perfect for a colony. Kirby checked his coordinates and rolled on over the curve of the world, from the night side through the dawn-belt and into the light of day, dropping lower with that splendid tearing thunder that only a rocket has. The seas were blue beneath him, and the forests green, and it was almost like the landings he had made on Earth long ago, except that the continents were a different shape.

He picked up the landmark in the south temperate zone, a mountain range with three great peaks in line. He crossed them, with the white snow throwing back the sunlight like a heliograph. There were miles of forest, and then a plain with a river running through it, a wide slow river the size of the Mississippi. There were game herds on the plain. They ran from the sound of the rocket, raising a mighty cloud of dust. Awe and disbelief came over Kirby. He set the ship down, very carefully as though it were a thing of glass, so carefully that the nerve-ends all over his body hurt with the agony of precision, and she was at rest in a bend of the river. The rockets were stilled, and there was a kind of terrible silence. Kirby listened to it, and knew that at least part of what Shari had said was true.

THE smoke and the hot dust settled or blew away, so that he could see out the port again. He looked, sitting in the pilot's chair with his hands still on the controls,

not moving, feeling like someone who has just died. His nerves didn't hurt any more, his head didn't ache, nothing felt at all. Five years, nearly six, in space, with an R-ship to hunt us down. And all the years before that, working on the *Lucy* in secret, lying, stealing, risking our necks every day and every night, and all of it aimed straight at this final moment, this now, that none of us ever really believed we'd reach. And we have reached it. We are safe.

I did it. Not taking away anything from the others, but ultimately it was me, Kirby, that told them how to fit the ship, and took her off, and flew her, and set her down. I did it, and I did it well.

Feeling came back to Kirby then. A weakness in the knees, a wild pounding of the heart and a general unnamed and nameless warmth that filled him like fire in the night. He looked out at the new world. It was a good, big world with horizons all around it, wide open to Andromeda and beyond. He was content.

"Go let 'em out, Pop," he said, "before they burst out through the seams."

Pop didn't answer. Kirby turned his head. The old man was sitting there with a dazed look and two undeniable tears in his eyes. His lips were moving, and presently Kirby understood that he was saying, over and over again, "I never thought we'd make it. So help me God, I never thought we'd make it."

Kirby got up, staggering a little. He put his hand on Pop's shoulder. "You old so-and-so," he said. "Didn't you trust me?"

Pop shook his head. "You're a good rocket man. So was I, once. But that wasn't enough. We needed miracles, too. One at the take-off, to beat the R-3's. One when you and Shari and the others got the robot starship they sent after us, that was a big miracle, Kirby. And one to make the trip at all, just to hold together and get here and make a safe landing. Three miracles. That's too many, Kirby."

"Well, we had 'em, old man. And now we don't need any more."

A long slow shudder slid through the bone and wiry muscle of the shoulder under Kirby's hand. "Unless they send more R-ships after us. More robot ships to hunt us down."

Kirby said furiously, "Oh, for God's sake." He took his hand away, before he used it to break Pop Barstow's neck. "Look, we just made a landing, we're alive, let us enjoy it a little before you start crying up more woe!"

Pop said wearily, "When you get to be my age you learn never to trust things when they're too good."

"That's a fine line of reasoning," Kirby snarled. "I suppose it would be better if we were all dead." He stamped out of the bridge, all the exultation gone from him, just Kirby again, a tired and angry man. Shari was waiting for him in the corridor. He jerked his head toward Pop inside, and said, "Why does he want to be like that?"

Her voice shook a little when she answered, and he saw that her habitual Martian calm was stretched very thin. "None of us is quite sane at this moment. We take it out in different ways. Listen!"

He listened. Below deck and now, it seemed, from outside, came a howling and whooping and clamoring that was the damndest sound Kirby had ever heard, like people laughing and crying and praying and having hysterics all in one breath. He shook his head, smiling uncertainly. Without knowing it he had taken hold of Shari's arms, and his fingers were sunk deep in the flesh.

"I did it," he said.

"You did it."

"Who let them out? I was just going down to open the hatch—"

"The young Shaw. He ran there as soon as the keel touched."

"Without waiting for orders. The young whelp! Oh, well, that's the end of orders, anyway. They're on their own now."

He shifted his grip until she was pulled in tight against his chest, so tight that it was hard for both of them to breathe. She was trembling. He kissed the top of her head, thinking vaguely how beautiful she was and how much he loved her, thinking, Damn Pop Barstow and his croaking! And Shari answered him without waiting for his words, "Yes, I was afraid. I have been afraid ever since we left Mars. And you are angry with the old man because R-ships could come and you don't want to think about it."

"He might've let me enjoy the landing."

"The old live always with their fears."

She tried to pull away, laughing in a choked-up, unfamiliar way. "Kirby, you will suffocate me! Let us go outside and stand on the ground and breathe the air. Let us get out of this hideous, this awful hateful ship!"

She said that last with such violence that he was astonished. She ran away from him down the corridor, to the ladder that led to the hatch. He blinked and went after her. They were practically alone in the ship now. Everybody had stampeded for the open, scattering out beyond the charred and smoking circle the landing jets had made, to where the prairie grass grew thick and green.

They were doing things that he had never seen adult men and women do before unless they were wild drunk. The children screamed and ran and rolled in the grass and the wild-flowers, and the little ones, the ship-born babies, cried. They had never seen a world and a sky, and they were frightened. For them, it was like a second birth.

Shari was still ahead of him. She mingled with the group, and he lost her in it, because suddenly people were hanging on him and crying and pounding him on the back, and even the women, who had not wanted to come at all and who had made the whole voyage under the most vocal protest, for this one brief moment loved Kirby next to life itself.

Here and there, on the edges of the crowd and in it, people began to go down on their knees.

Nobody said anything, nobody led the movement, but it spread and the crowd got quieter, and finally it was all quiet and everybody was kneeling, or standing with a bowed head. And Kirby saw Shari, far out on one side where the prairie began to slope upward toward the foothills and the forest. She had stopped running. She was standing still.

He went to her. The air was warm, with a feel and taste of spring. His body felt heavy and pleasantly weak in the unaccustomed gravity, his feet were clumsy in the grass after the years of walking on bare cold iron. It was good. It was good to think of building a house and living here, free

from acts of law that told you where to live and where to work so the economic balance could not be upset, law that forbade men forever more from growing because growth was always accompanied by pain for somebody, so we'll stop right here and leave the stars untouched, leave space untouched except for the Government-owned, Government-operated robot ships which are safe because they cannot possibly rebel.

It was good to think of living with Shari where there was not a dead weight of social custom to stumble over everywhere they turned, because she was Martian and he was not, and that made it somehow improper that they should love each other.

He put his arms around her and told her so, not with words because she didn't need them, and he had learned that thoughts were better anyway. Then he realized that she was not listening to him. She was not even looking at him, her eyes unfocused and far-away, with nothing in them but a shadow.

He asked her what the matter was. She did not answer, and after a while he shook her hard, and shouted her name. She shivered, and her head dropped forward. He thought she was going to faint, but then she said, "Kirby, please, I want to go back to the ship."

"But you were so crazy to get out of it! What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing."

"Don't give me that. You're a telepath, and you got something that frightened you. What was it?"

She looked from him to the kneeling people and then to the old ship that had done with flying. And she lifted her head and smiled and said, "I told you, we are all mad today. Let us not think of it again . . . never."

She began to chatter about where they would build their house, bright words with nothing behind them, pulling him back toward where the others were. He stopped that.

"What was it that frightened you, Shari?"

She began to cry, the second time in his life that he had seen her do it.

She said, "I don't know what it was, I can't tell you, Kirby, because I just don't know!"

AFTER nearly six years of eternity, there was time again. There were days and nights—not abstractions marked out on a dial, but actual risings and settings of the sun, and the star-shot darknesses in between. It was a fine thing to have time back again. For quite some bit of it the people of the *Lucy B. Davenport* went as nearly sleepless as possible, just for the pleasure of rediscovering dawn, and seeing what the stars looked like with a sky between to veil them off. Alpha Centauri III lacked a moon, and they were sorry about that, but they named it New Earth anyway, and they loved it perhaps more than they ever had Old Earth, simply because they had been so long without any world at all.

There was wind again, and rain, and all the smells that come with them, with wet grass and wet ground and then a hot sun on top of them to make them steam. There were clouds, and the sound of thunder. The people of the ship stayed outside as much as they could, sheltering under bits of canvas or nothing at all, going in only when they had to. They worshipped the sun. They wallowed and glutted in the light of it, soaking it in, scalding themselves with it until they were red as lobsters, so greedy for it that they made no complaint about having two suns often in the sky, which made for double shadows and a quite un-Earthly glare.

They got muscles in their legs again, and the ship-born babies learned to walk properly, carrying their spines straight against the pull of gravity. And a queer thing happened. Kirby and Pop Barstow were rocket men, and all the others were technicians, expert workers with electricity and electronics and nucleonics and cybernetics and electromagnetics. Not one of them had in his entire life turned a sod or planted a seed, nor had he ever felt the lack of it. Yet now, with an urge as deep and unspoken as the urge of the lemming, each one of them got hold of some sort of an implement and went out to dig with it.

There were two tractors in the *Lucy*, part of the cargo she had been carrying when her owner hid her away to evade the Government decree that all manned rockets be

surrendered and broken up. They trundled those out and broke the prairie sod, scratching out lopsided fields with crooked furrows in them, wearing out the books they had on Farming: How to Do It. Wearing out their hands and their backs and their tempers, but driven on by nearly six years of life between iron walls, on iron decks, hungry with a terrible hunger for the sun and the soil that they had never thought of before, and never been without. The women put in gardens, and the children worked them, and the ship-born babies took like small pigs joyously to the mud, and Kirby fought to have somebody look after the *Lucy's* hydroponic tanks because it would be a long time till harvest and God alone knew what might come up.

After they planted, they began to build. And so far, nothing had bothered them. No shape of menace had appeared, no voice had spoken. The automatic cameras of the RSS-1 had shown the planet to be uninhabited in the sense of human life, and so there were no hostile natives to be feared. Even the game herds had withdrawn, not liking the noise and the activity and the unaccustomed smells. If there were large carnivores, they had not come near the ship, perhaps because of the fires that burned all night around where the people were camped. But Kirby had not forgotten Shari's behavior on the day of landing. She seemed to have done so herself, but he knew her better than that, and he knew her better than to think it had all been nothing more than the nervous hysteria of the time.

There was a tributary stream that ran down from the foothills to the north, pouring into the river a half mile or so above where the ship had come down. From its bed they hauled flat stones to make foundations, and at its side, where there was a bay of slack water, they set up the sawmill they had put together during the voyage. And one evening, when he and Shari had finished laying three courses of stone, in an oblong form that was almost square at the corners, Kirby said, "We're going to start lumbering tomorrow."

"I know." She sat down on the hopeful little structure they had raised out of nothing toward being a house. She looked tired and dirty, and her knuckles were barked and

bleeding. She sucked them methodically, staring at the ground.

Kirby said, "We'll be going up into the forest for the first time. There." He pointed, remembering how she had stood and the way she had been facing.

"Yes," she said. "I know."

"Do you want to tell me now what it was you saw or heard or thought, up there?"

"I can't." She hesitated, groping for words that would explain to him something he had never experienced. "It was not even thought, and yet it was, too, but—" She shook her head.

"But you had some kind of a contact. Have you had it since?"

"No."

Rather sharply, Kirby said, "You must know something about it. Is it dangerous? Is it animals or people or some life-form we never heard of?"

She shouted at him, "I don't know!"

He sat down beside her. "All right, Shari. But you must know why you were afraid of it."

"YES. I know that." And she began slowly to put words to an old nightmare they had shared between them, a thing they still dreamed about and almost never mentioned. "Do you remember the robot R-ship, and the great brain it had, all the countless little tubes and tiny filaments? It thought, Kirby. It even felt. Not like humans think and feel, but in its own way. Do you remember how we drove it mad when we had to save ourselves?"

"Yes," said Kirby. "I remember."

"When I was standing alone there, away from the others, looking toward the forest and thinking how strange and beautiful it was—it is the first one I have ever seen, except in pictures—suddenly the forest was blotted out and in my mind I saw something else. I saw the brain of the R-ship."

Kirby forgot to breathe.

"I saw it," said Shari, "from the inside."

Kirby said carefully, "From the inside. How was that?"

"First as a whole, with every tube and circuit clearly marked, and the linkages to the master controls lined out. Then, still as a whole, but with smaller things superimposed on it, somehow staying all clear,

though, at the same time. I could see the germanium crystals in the transistors. I could see exactly how the current flowed through circuits. I could see—structure.”

She stopped, and Kirby said, “Go on.”

“I could see atoms,” she said, in a flat, far-off voice. “I could see the particles inside the atoms. Quite clearly, Kirby. I could even see the spaces between the nucleons.”

Kirby said, “My God.”

He did not say anything more for a long time, and neither did she. The shadows got long, and a breeze went over the prairie, shaking the grass in wide slow ripples. Somewhere a creature that was almost, but not quite, a bird, sang an evensong composed of three sweet dropping notes.

Kirby shivered. “Total comprehension. Total visualization, total projection. And it can see inside atoms.”

There was another long stillness. The far peaks turned to purple, and from the highest one a plume of snow like a white feather was blown out by a gale wind they could neither hear nor feel. The bird-creature stopped singing.

“All right,” said Kirby. “Accept that. But why the R-ship’s brain?”

“It was trying to get in contact with it. It must have thought the *Lucy* was a robot ship, the RSS-1 come back again.”

The forests grew darker and darker, creeping closer onto the plain. No, thought Kirby, that’s only a trick of the light, and don’t let’s lose our grip altogether.

Something that can see the particles inside an atom, and wants to hold converse with the cybernetic brain of a robot ship—

“Why did it want to, Shari? Was it in welcome, fear, what?”

She said miserably, “I don’t know. It came so fast, a flash like a—well, like a blow on the head. I can’t describe it. I saw what I have told you, and then my own fear rushed up and closed it out. I don’t know what it felt, or whether it felt at all.”

With sudden violence, Kirby said, “Is there something else now trying to take this away from us? Do we have to fight every step of the way?” He stared at the dark forest. For a long time the RSS-1 had been It, the enemy, the destroyer. He was sick of things called It, and this one did not even have a face, a shape.

But It had a brain.

He turned and took her hands. “Shari.”

“No, please, Kirby.”

“I’m right here, nothing can hurt you.”

“Please—”

“I’m going up there tomorrow. A lot of us are going. I want you to try and contact this thing again. I want to know what it is.”

She sat silent for a moment, quite rigid. Then she said, “Very well, Kirby.” Her face became closed and secret, but her hands were gripped on his, the hands of a child waiting for the lash to fall.

Silence, and the shadows stretched and flowed until they filled the plain. The mountains put off their purple for a midnight blue.

Shari’s hands relaxed. She sighed and said, “It’s not there now. At least I can’t hear it. There are many voices in the forest, but they say only the small animal things about fear and hunger and sleep.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing.”

Kirby got up. “All right, we better get back to the ship. I’m hungry.” They started to walk toward where the evening fires burned. “Don’t say anything about this to the others.”

“No.”

“Damn it,” said Kirby savagely, “I wish we had guns.” Explosive weapons, like hunting and physical violence, had long been obsolete in the Solar System.

“Perhaps guns would not be any more use than the little shockers.”

“Maybe not, but there was something very comforting, I remember, in just the feel of one in your hand.”

He was too tired not to sleep that night, but not too tired to dream. He prowled the corridors of nightmare, angry and afraid, seeing nothing but knowing that he was seen, down to the last smallest particle of the atoms that made him. After a while he realized that he was holding a little world between his hands as a child holds a ball, and shouting as a child shouts that it was his, that he had fought for it and would not give it up. And nothing answered him but laughter, of a kind that was very ugly in his ears because it was neither human nor amused nor even cruel. He looked up and

all around to see where it came from, clutching his world tight, and there was a Being, lapped in darkness and veiled in clouds, a thing incongruously like a mountain with a great domed head. It looked at him, with no eyes that he could see, and the atoms that were in him began to move apart until his body was like a film of smoke and the world slipped through his ghostly fingers, and the Being took it, saying, "It is mine." Kirby woke before dawn, not very much rested.

Shari was awake too. She said, "Let me go with you."

"No, I took you into the R-ship with me because I had to, but this is different."

"I might be able to warn you."

"I've had a warning. There'll be twenty-four of us, Shari, it can't surprise us all at once. And if we do have to fight or run, I don't want you there to worry about."

She glowered at him, half rebellious and half relieved. He smiled. "Besides, if you came, all the other wives would want to come too. Don't wish that on me."

Reluctantly she nodded and went to get his breakfast. While he was eating it she disappeared, and did not return until the party was almost ready to go, twenty-four sleepy-eyed men loaded with three portable chainsaws that worked on atomic batteries, and a dozen old-fashioned axes. Kirby carried a long double-handed saw, two hatchets, and a shocker. He still wished he had a gun.

SHARI shook her head and said in rapid Martian so the others would not understand, "I tried again, but there was nothing. Be careful, Kirby."

The other wives were saying their good-byes. You let somebody else cut down those trees, Joe, I don't want you anywhere near them when they fall, you hear me, Joe? Be awfully careful with that axe, you could cut your leg off and bleed to death up there, did anybody remember to take plenty of bandages and things? And watch out for wild animals, and I'll be just sick with worry every minute until you get back.

The men trudged away, convinced that not one of them could possibly survive.

But the sun rose, and burned away the gloom for everyone but Kirby. He was at

the head of the column. Wilson was beside him, carrying the field-radio, and big George Krejewski, and Weiss the cyberneticist, and the curly-headed kid Marapese who had studied to be a pilot on the voyage and who had spent several years simultaneously worshipping Kirby and hoping that he would break his neck, not permanently of course, so that he, Marapese, might land the *Lucy Davenport* as no ship had ever been landed before. Wilson and Weiss and Krejewski had been with Kirby when they fought the robot ship RSS-1, and that made sort of a bond between them. It also, at this moment, gave Kirby the creeps. It seemed too coincidental to be healthy.

They followed the course of the tributary, and by the time the companion sun came up they had reached the limits of their geographic knowledge. Nobody had thought it wise to go exploring by twos and threes or alone, and there had been too much to do to spare men for big parties like this one. The forest was still a good way off. Kirby expected to reach it in the late afternoon, but he figured to make camp along the stream, and in the open. He wanted daylight before they went in among those mammoth trees.

There were tracks in the mud along the bank, where creatures had come down to drink. The hoofed ones seemed to be still in the odd-toed-ungulate stage, but there were others that showed a characteristic pad-and-claw pattern, and presently they came upon the remains of a carnivore's dinner. They looked at it for some time with the civilized man's disgusted wonder at the messiness of primitive living and dying, and Kirby said, "No stragglers, please. The critter must have been the size of a lion to pull down a buck that big."

They saw one later in the afternoon, a thick yellowish animal barred and splashed with brown. It watched them from the edge of a thicket, and snarled, and then melted silently away.

That was all. A menace, perhaps, but a normal one, and not dangerous if they stayed together. Nothing came out of the forest. There was no sound but the wind, and the bird-things calling.

Nothing happened that night, either. They built a ring of fires and set guards,

armed with the shockers that were powerful enough to stun anything within reason at close range. There was no occasion to use them. At dawn Kirby talked by radio with the ship, mustered his forces, and covered the remaining mile or so to the forest's edge.

It was virgin woods, such as had not been seen on Earth for centuries. The trees went up and up until their tops were lost and the craning onlooker fell over backward. The trunks were of a size that made the idea of cutting them with little saws and axes mere folly. They were hoary-looking trees, hung over with vines and moss and waxy parasitical growths, and they bore their own dead sometimes on their shoulders, where a giant had reeled over in a storm-wind and not found room to fall. To these men, city born and city bred on mechanized, urban worlds, it was overpowering and in an odd way deeply exciting. When their first awed reaction was over they began to finger their axes and look hungrily at the trunks.

Kirby strained his ears and heard nothing but the rustle of leaves far overhead, and the faint skitterings and skreekings of the small people who dwell in all woods, and are no danger to anybody.

He talked to the ship again. "It looks okay. We'll start setting up a permanent camp, and the boys reckon to cut down the first tree today, just to see how it's done."

Fenner, the *Lucy's* operator on the other end, laughed and started to say something, and then the radio exploded into the wildest burst of static a man ever had to deafen his ears. Kirby said a startled word or two, and suddenly he realized that Wilson was tugging at his sleeve. He was jabbing his other hand at the air, and shouting. Kirby turned off the radio, and in the abrupt silence Wilson bellowed, "—over there quick, before—"

KIRBY jumped up. He sprang forward two or three steps in the direction Wilson was pointing, and Wilson finished in a much smaller voice, "—before it's gone."

"Where?" said Kirby, getting his shocker into his hand.

"Right there. Well, it was there. I guess it is gone now."

Kirby and all the others quartered the whole area. There was nothing there, not even any tracks showing on the thick mat left by a million years of falling leaves. Kirby said, "What was it, Wils?"

"I didn't get a good look. But it was big."

"As big as a dog, or a man, or an elephant? How big?"

"About—so." Wilson indicated a height and width that called nothing readily to mind, except that it was wider than a man shorter than an elephant. "It didn't make any noise. I just happened to see it out of the corner of my eye, like a darker shadow, and then before I could attract your attention it was gone again."

"Must be fast on its feet," said Marapese, with an insulting note of doubt. "Also light, not to make any noise with all these branches and twigs lying around." He walked around, crackling at every step.

"Stow it," said Kirby. "We don't know what might be in here, or what it can do. Let's not get too sure of ourselves." He picked up the radio again. He felt very insecure and uneasy. The static had stopped. Fenner had hung on, waiting, and he got perhaps three sentences through to him before the reception blew again. "That's fine," said Kirby. "That is just dandy."

MacLeod, a small rusty-haired man who knew radios better than he knew his own children, looked it over. "Nothing wrong here. Interference of some kind but I can't imagine what. It worked all right this morning." He turned the dial, frowning, and got another blast of static.

"Yeah," said Kirby. "It worked out on the plain." *If it can see inside atoms, it wouldn't have any trouble jamming a radio.* It suddenly became immensely important to talk to the ship again. "Mac, let's take it out there again and try it. George, you come along too. Let's make that a rule, never go anywhere except in threes. Keep your eyes open, and if you want to cut something, pick a tree close to the water."

They had a book on Lumbering: How to Do It. He left them with it and went back with Mac and George Krejewski, out onto the plain. They kept the radio on, but throttled down so the static did not deafen them. Two or three times Kirby thought

he heard Fenner's voice, but the static kept on, Kirby's spine grew colder and his steps faster. Mac said, "What's put the wind up you? It's only static."

And then it was not. Then it was gone entirely and the voice of Fenner came through clear as a bell, saying quite insanely, "—sure it'll repeat, it's taped of course and set to start broadcasting by some kind of mass-proximity device. Still very faint, but it won't stay that way and Kirby, if you don't clear up that damn static jam—oh. You're there. Stay there, don't go away again."

MacLeod said, "What the hell?"

Krejewski looked at Kirby, and Kirby said into the transmitter, "Fenner. Stop babbling. What is it?"

Fenner said, "I'm going to shift my mike. It's coming in again. Listen."

Crackle, crackle, pop, very faint, like an old-fashioned phonograph record with dust on it.

Then a voice, also very faint, a midget speaking down a tube you could measure in fractions of a light-year. Speaking clearly and slowly, so that even an idiot child should understand. From the RSS-2 to the *Lucy B. Davenport*, a recorded message, Minor Howell, President of the United Worlds of the Solar System, to Captain Philip Kirby. Your data was incomplete. The full report of the RSS-1 shows an unidentified element present on Alpha Centauri III which makes it untenable for human life. I repeat, the planet is not habitable for human life. The RSS-2 is a converted carrier with all necessary supplies aboard to accommodate your entire company. The RSS-2 will make a single landing, and then return. For the sake of the women and children, I urge you to see that all return with it, as no further attempt can be made to rescue you. And I give you my personal assurance that no punitive action will be taken against you on your return.

Crackle, scratch, click, and another voice. It is imperative that you broadcast your coordinates. RSS-2 cannot land unless your position is known. Broadcast your coordinates. Estimated landing time, 5 days, 14 hours. This message will be repeated every hour.

Silence.

III

SILENCE. Fenner's voice came through it, thin and sharp with panic. "Did you hear that, Kirby? Did you hear what it said?"

Kirby said, "Yes, I heard." The sun was hot on the back of his neck. Under his feet were bruised grasses and a species of purple wildflower. They had a bittersweet, greenish smell. He didn't feel anything inside, except the automatic knotting up of the central ganglion. What were you supposed to feel at a moment like this?

Without knowing he was going to do it, he shouted, "They couldn't let us alone, could they? All this distance away, but they couldn't let us alone!"

"—did it mean?" Krejewski was saying. "An element like uranium, or like 'elements of the Fleet,' or—" He let his voice fade out. It did not sound like his voice.

Unidentified element. Unidentified thing that sees through atoms, that can comprehend in toto a mechanism so complex that it requires a team of experts to comprehend even its apparent parts. It had contact with RSS-1. And RSS-1 must have recorded it somewhere in the mass of data brought back from its voyage.

Untenable for human life. And so this was how it ended. This, after triumph, was the feel and the taste and the smell of defeat.

Fenner's voice, insistent, shrill. "Could that be true? We made all the tests and nothing showed up. Could there be something here?"

Yes, Fenner, there is something here. Yes, all you wives and mothers who will shortly scream out that same question, there is something here.

MacLeod said slowly, "Our data was incomplete. Only a few top Government men ever saw the full report, and only scraps of it were smuggled out. We just assumed—" He stared at Kirby, stricken with guilt and fear. "All those women and kids. Kirby, what have we done?"

Blind rage, violent, sudden, childish denying reason. "I don't believe it. I would not believe the Government on oath!"

But was it denying reason? There was a discrepancy here, a lack of logic. "Listen, they tried to kill us themselves, didn't they?"

They sent RSS-1 after us with torpedoes, didn't they?"

There was only one answer to that. "Yes."

"All right. Now why are they suddenly so anxious to save our lives that they'd fit up another R-ship and send it all the way out here to rescue us from an 'unidentified' danger? You answer me that."

They could not.

"Well, I can," Kirby said, rushing ahead as though by sheer savagery he could make the words be true, "it's a trap. Look, we broke the unbreakable law. We upset their whole monopolistic system of government by proving that their R-ships weren't invincible, that men could still defy them and go anywhere they wanted to. They tried to kill us—a legal execution. It didn't work, and we proved to the Solar System that space was still free. But they can't let it stay proved, or their whole government will collapse. So they've tried a different way."

"You think," said Krejewski, "that the idea is to get us all together in this second R-ship and then blow it up or something?"

Kirby considered that. "I doubt it. It wouldn't be effective. Don't you get the picture? We left in an old manned rocket and a blaze of glory. We come back humbly in an R-ship, rescued by the kind Government from the consequences of our own folly. Now the Government is the hero, and we're chumps, and nobody will ever try star-voyaging again, at least not in this era."

They thought that over, and the suns blazed on Kirby's head and set a fire in it. When MacLeod said slowly, "It's your opinion, then, that the message is no more than a lie to frighten us into going home?" he hesitated only a fractional second before he said, "Yes."

Damn the thing that can see inside of atoms. Damn it, and ignore it. It hasn't hurt anybody yet. Maybe it never will. And maybe Shari only dreamed it, anyway.

"Fenner," he said. "Don't give our position no matter how loud they scream. We're coming back."

"Fat lot of good that'll do," said Fenner sourly, and signed off. Kirby turned around. "Let's get the others," he said to MacLeod and Krejewski. He started back toward the forest. He was shaking and dizzy, and he walked fast because if he did not he would

have to stop and be sick. RSS-2, Robot Star Ship Two. They must have worked overtime and Sundays to fit one up so fast, but they would. They would have to. They had had a complete monopoly on space for too long to let it be broken without a struggle by a bunch of undistinguished people like themselves. There must be millions of other undistinguished people who, like them, were tired of living like children, and if enough of them reasserted the human right to a universe with no man-made fences to close it off, the present Government and its policy of stagnation-for-profit—its own profit through the trade and passenger monopoly of the robot ships—would be finished.

Perhaps enough people had already rebelled, so that merely destroying the people of the *Lucy Davenport* was no longer enough. They had now to be discredited, and this was the way to do it.

And now, thought Kirby, I'm caught between two of them—another R-ship, and It, the mountain-without-a-face.

He said aloud, "They won't get away with it."

MacLeod and Krejewski stopped talking between themselves and looked at him.

"I'm going to find out," Kirby said.

"Find out what?" asked MacLeod.

"Whether this thing is dangerous to human life."

"What thing, though, Kirby? That's the trouble. What, and where, and how do you go about finding it?"

They looked around them, and the world had grown suddenly enormous and far-spreading, and full of sinister mysteries.

THEY walked in among the trees to the place where they had left the others. A couple of them were chopping clumsily at a ten-foot-thick tree bole, not making much headway. In three different places, three separate groups of men were hunkered down around the three chainsaws, poking at them. Kirby said bluntly, "Pack up. We've got to go back."

"Might as well," said a big man named Hanawalt. "We can't do much with the axes alone, and the chainsaws won't work."

"What do you mean, they won't work?" asked Krejewski. "They worked all right day before yesterday. I tested them myself."

"They don't work now," said Hanawalt. "Nothing wrong with 'em. They just don't work."

"That's crazy."

"So," said MacLeod, "was the radio."

"We can worry about that later," Kirby said, and knocked radio and chain-saws out of their heads with the news of the oncoming R-ship. They took it first in a stunned silence, and then with such an outburst of talk and questions, curses and speculation that Kirby had all he could do to get them loaded up and ready to move. And then the sound and the fury died away and there was only the quiet of discouraged men.

"A hell of a thing," said Wilson. "All this way, all the years we put in."

"We're not licked yet," said Kirby, and swung the long saw over his shoulders again.

Wilson glanced at him and asked, "Aren't we?"

Kirby turned away from him. "Everybody ready?" They were lined up in a straggling line, and their thoughts were plain on their faces. They were not good thoughts, and Hanawalt muttered, "I hate to think what my wife is going to say to me."

Somebody else said, "We're all in the same boat." Which made it no better. The women had not wanted to come in the first place. They had been more or less forced into it, and Kirby did not want to go back and face them any more than the others. He kicked irritably at a blanket roll and an axe left lying on the ground, and demanded to know who it belonged to. "No need to start throwing away good equipment just because you're scared."

A few of them answered him back rather nastily, and it developed that the blanket roll did not belong to anybody. Each man there had his full load.

The feeling of sickness in Kirby's middle became almost unbearable. He held it down, and asked, "Who's missing?"

After a moment or two, they came up with a name.

"Joe Marapese."

"Oh, lord," said Kirby. "All right, let's find him."

They fanned out, yelling, working in a widening circle until Kirby was afraid they would get out of touch and pulled them in,

lest he lose some more. There was no Joe Marapese. There was no blood, no sign of a struggle, no tracks, human or otherwise. There had not been, that anyone could remember, even any sound.

"Wandered off exploring," Kirby said. He repeated it, with a harsh note of firmness. "We can't wait all day for him." He scribbled a note and left it on Marapese's blanket. "He can catch up with us."

The others did not look happy about it, but they did not protest. All at once they seemed very anxious to get out of the forest. Kirby did not try to hold them back.

The plain was wide and empty. They plodded across it, not talking much. First one sun went down, and then the other, and they went on through the twilight and into darkness. It was Kirby who first saw the black bulk of the *Lucy Davenport* against the sky, and the circle of fires around her base like a twinkling mockery of stars. And he thought, They're mine. I brought them here, and I won't let them go. I won't let it all be made for nothing!

Then in a few minutes, when they were closer, the wives of the men came running out to meet them, and Kirby thought, this time I won't have much to say about it.

He left them to look for Shari. She was waiting, as she always did, apart from the others. Even in the dusk outside the firelight her face looked strained, and when she took his hands her fingers were cold, holding his too tightly.

He nodded toward the women. "Have they been like that all day?"

"Worse. This morning, when they first heard the message—oh, Kirby! They believe the world is somehow poisoned and they will probably all die. They have locked up all the children in the ship, as though that would help. Poor souls!" She shook her head between pity and exasperation. "It is hard to blame them."

"That's what's going to beat us, though," said Kirby sombrely. "Panic. The Government counted on that, of course. It's their major weapon, and they used it to the hilt in that message. Shari, we lost a man today."

She looked at him, startled. "Not killed? I tried to follow you, but there were so many minds, so many emotions—"

"He just disappeared. Young Marapese. Shari, will you see if you can find him? I want to know if he's still alive."

Marapese's folks would want to know that, too.

Shari walked away from the fires, out into the darkness, away from the people. She said, "You should have taken me with you. I could only get a confusion of things. It was thinking toward you this time, not toward the ship. What did it do?"

"Jammed the radio. Stopped the chain-saws from working. That's what made me wonder. Did it take young Marapese too?"

"I will try." She shut her eyes and was silent for several minutes. Then she said, "I cannot hear him. If he is alive, he is very far away."

He asked her, "Is the message true?"

She answered, as he had known she would, "I do not know."

"I want to find out. I'd like your help, Shari, but this time you don't have to give it. This time the R-ship is coming, not to kill you, but to take you back. You have a free choice."

She made a small sound that might have been laughter, except that it was a little too sharply barbed. "Where you are concerned, my choice is never free."

"I tried to make you stay at home."

"And I came. And I will help."

He put his arm around her and walked with her back to the ship. The people had fallen quiet, except for a few hushed sobs. And then, high and unearthly, a woman shrieked.

"There's a light on the plain—*something's out there!*"

IV

EVERY woman within earshot let out at least one shriek to match, and then, as though a great gust of wind had picked them up like grains of dust, they moved all together toward the ship's main hatch, taking the men with them. Kirby grabbed Shari back out of the way, yelling as loud as he could at them to keep their heads. Some of the men were trying to stem the rush, but it was not doing any good. They streamed up the ramp, jammed and squeezed

and popped like corks in through the hatchway, and were gone.

Pop Barstow came out from under the ramp where he had taken refuge, and a minute or two later three men and then a couple more came back out of the hatch, looking sheepish.

Pop Barstow chuckled. "Didn't know they could move so fast, did you?"

Krejewski was among the men, and Wilson, who looked as though any danger was preferable to what he was getting from his wife. They came up to Kirby. "Did you see the light?"

"No. But we better look for it. Got your shockers?"

They went together through the circle of fires, into the outer night. Shari did not move, standing with her eyes shut. Suddenly she cried out,

"Kirby, wait!"

She ran after them between the fires. Kirby caught her. He pointed out into the black void. A beam of light showed. It shot up strongly from the ground, and then wavered erratically, and fell. It seemed to be about a quarter of a mile away. The men swore uneasily, and Wilson said, "What do you suppose that is?"

Shari said, "It's Marapese."

Kirby stared down at her in the darkness. "What? But a minute ago—"

"A minute ago he was not there. Now he is."

"Marapese," said Wilson. He looked in the direction of the light, and then in the direction of the forest where they had last seen him. "How did he get there?"

"Well," said Kirby, "let's go get him." He patted Shari. "Go on back to the ship and tell 'em. That'll quiet them down."

Shari said acidly, "They will not believe me, but I'll try."

Kirby and the others went out across the plain. They had pocket torches, but even so they stumbled in the tangled grasses and the clumps of sturdy weed. The distant light flared up again, and again was lost.

Krejewski said, "He's using his torch to signal. He must be hurt or something. Why didn't he just walk the rest of the way?"

They speculated uselessly on the whys and wherefores of Marapese's condition. The light was farther off than they had

thought, but presently they came up to it. It was Marapese. He was sitting down, holding the torch between his hands and then dropping it in a peculiarly childish way, as though he kept forgetting what he was doing with it. He let out a wild yell when the men came up, and then he stared at Kirby and the others as though he couldn't remember who they were. He did not seem to be hurt. His clothing was muddy and his feet were wet, but beyond that he was all right, physically at least.

Kirby knelt down beside him. "Joe," he said, "It's me, Kirby. Joe, look here."

Joe looked. Then he began to cry.

Kirby shook him. "Stop that. Shut it up."

Marapese's teeth came together with an audible clack. "I'm cold," he said. "I'm all wet."

Kirby looked at his own hands. He had used them to shake the boy, and there was mud on them, still fresh. "Where'd you get this?" he asked Marapese. "What happened to you?"

"I don't know."

Something quivered inside Kirby. He had heard Shari use those same words too often. "Look," he said. "You wandered away from us in the woods. You went somewhere. Where?"

"I didn't," said Marapese, and made a series of unpleasant hic-ing sounds in his throat. Kirby shook him again.

"Come on, now. Tell me about it."

"I didn't go anywhere! I just went for one minute behind a tree, and I wasn't ten feet away from Wils and Hanawalt. They were trying to get one of the chain-saws going. And then I wasn't there any more."

"What do you mean, you weren't there any more?"

"I was in another place, that's what I mean. One minute I was behind the tree, and the next minute there wasn't any tree and I was up to my knees in water in a damned great swamp, and none of the guys were around."

Wilson snorted. "Ha." Marapese had not believed his animal, and he was not going to believe Marapese's miraculous translation in space. "You wandered off like an idiot and fell in a bog, that's all."

But Kirby, who was cold all through now with an icy chill that was not borne on any

wind, fingered the wet mud on his palm and asked, "How did you get here, Joe? Did you walk?"

"No," said Marapese. "I just—*came*."

"Like it happened before? You were there, and then you were here, just like that?"

"Yeah."

"You didn't black out any time?"

"No. I wandered around the swamp all day, trying to find my way out. I couldn't figure it, and I was scared, but I didn't black out. Then it got dark—"

He lapsed into a violent fit of shivering, and when he went on again his words were punctuated by the chattering of his teeth.

"Then I was really scared, I thought I was going to die in there and nobody would ever find me. I kept wallowing around, falling over things, and then here I was."

His voice went up a couple of octaves, until it sounded like a girl's. "Look, if you don't believe me, my clothes are still wet. Look at my boots. I didn't get that walking across a dry plain."

"You know," said Krejewski on a note of pure awe, "that's true."

They looked out into the great dark, and Wilson muttered, "First the radio, and then the saws, and now this, and you can't explain any of them."

Kirby said bitterly, "*Ad astra per ardua*. Well, we had the *ardua*, plenty of it, more than enough. Enough!" he shouted, out into the night, out toward the forest and the far-off peaks. "It isn't fair, damn you!"

He started to haul Marapese to his feet, not gently at all, but roughly, and cursing while he did it in a fumbling sort of way, not picking his words well. "Not fair. You can't fight everything. It was hard enough to get here, we had a right to some breaks. Just not fair!"

Krejewski came up on the other side of Marapese. "Okay, Kirby. I'll give you a hand."

They slogged back over the plain, half leading, half carrying Marapese, whose clothes were drying on him fast now in the wind, as though to bear him out. Kirby had stopped cursing now. His teeth were shut tight together and he put each foot down hard, stamp, and then stamp again, as though he were marching someplace to a

driving music no one else could hear. After a long while he asked Marapese a question.

"Where was this swampy place?"

"I don't know. Somewhere in the forest, I guess. It felt like a long way off."

"See anything there?"

"Trees, all dead. Mud and water and reeds."

"Anything else? Anything alive?"

Marapese did not answer.

"Well, did you?"

"I didn't see anything. But I thought I heard things moving around, and some of the things I fell over—"

He began to cry again, dismally, like a frightened child.

"They weren't there, Kirby. I'd stumble, and then whatever in heaven it was would be gone."

The night was huge and dark, and the wind blew wide over the prairie. The men began to walk very fast toward the fires, dragging Marapese with them.

MOST of the people were still inside the ship. They got Marapese down to the cargo deck, where his family took him over, in a setting of tired pandemonium. Nobody, apparently, had thought of sleep. Children cried, and there was a noise of talking as incessant as the sound of running water. It did not abate as the men told the story of Marapese.

Kirby took Shari outside into the corridor and told it to her. "It sounds like something I've read or heard about," he said, "Something with a name."

She gave him a Martian word that meant something like "thought-moving," and he said, "Teleportation, that's it. Well, I suppose if you can see atomic structure, moving things around wouldn't be too difficult." He shivered. "I sometimes think the crack-pots were right and God never meant us to make the stars. Everything's against us. R-ships, and now super-beings with a psi power as big as all outdoors. How are you going to fight that?"

From the open hatch came the sound of a woman's voice crying out to somebody, "You mean you brought us here without really knowing whether this world was safe or not?"

A man's voice answered miserably, "We

thought we knew. There was nothing to make us doubt—"

"You thought you knew," the woman repeated slowly. "Oh my God."

Wilson stuck his head through the hatch and said to Kirby, "I think you better come down."

Knowing full well it was a mistake, he did so. They had been ripening for this all day, and Marapese's weird adventure was the final push. Wilson's wife, an old enemy of Kirby's, was laying for him at the foot of the ladder.

"Fenner says you told him not to broadcast our position to the R-ship."

"I did."

There was a howl and a surge, both rather muted, from the women, and Sally Wilson cried, "You'd keep us here to die just so you wouldn't have to admit you were wrong! Well, you're not giving the orders any more, Phil Kirby. We'll make up our own minds whether we want to live or die."

"I only thought," said Kirby, with a mildness he did not feel, "that the position should not be given until everybody had had a chance to think about it." He turned away from her and climbed up the ladder a few rungs, waving his free arm to get their attention. "Will you quiet down and listen to me for a minute? This is the biggest decision you'll ever make in your lives—don't make it too hastily. The R-ship—"

Sally Wilson cried out, "Decision! Does anybody have to think twice before they decide to save their children from a horrible death?"

Kirby looked around. "Wils, Wils, will you shut her up, just for one minute? Because if you don't, I will." To the others he said, "Nobody's asking you to stay and face death. All I'm saying is, let's find out if we are facing death. We can give the R-ship our position any time up to a day before it's due to land, but once we do give it, that's it. We'll have R-ship whether we want it or not, and it might not be so easy to get rid of."

Wilson jerked hard on Sally's arm, talking loud to get in ahead of her. "A couple of times today you talked as though you knew something, Kirby. Have you got a line on this 'unidentified' thing?"

"Shari has."

"Well," said Sally, "that makes it all different. And of course Shari wouldn't dream of lying just to make you look good."

"I don't think she would," said Kirby. "After all, she likes living too." To Wilson he said, "There's another point. It's always been accepted that the RSS-1's report was not made public because it showed a habitable world out here and people might be tempted to try and get to it. Well, if the report showed it wasn't habitable, why not publish it, with the films and everything for proof, and settle the matter once and for all?"

"I hadn't thought of that," said Wilson. He thought about it. "It does seem they would have, all right. And yet there is something on this world, Kirby. It might be something—" He hesitated, and then finished, "Well, something the cameras couldn't photograph."

Mountain-without-a-face, thought Kirby, harking back to the symbolic figure of his dream. It could be without a body, too. Marapese had not seen anything.

With sullen stubbornness he said, "I'm going to find out, anyway, before I throw away a wide new world just because Minor Howell doesn't want me to have it."

A small plump woman with a small plump jaw like a steel trap elbowed her way to the front. She was Fenner's wife, and she had been a radio operator herself in Civil Communications before her marriage. Kirby's heart had begun to sink before she ever opened her mouth.

"All this arguing," she said, "is beside the point. My husband didn't have guts enough to take the responsibility, but I did. I broadcast the coordinates."

V

ONE by one, on the heels of Mrs. Fenner's statement, the people in the cargo deck stopped talking. It got so still that the sniffing of the children and the occasional creaking of a cot as somebody moved on it were almost painfully loud.

This was it. This was the decision, done and made. After a day of emotional debauch, it was as sobering as a slap in the face.

It had a strange effect on Kirby. A single surge of intense anger died away almost before it was formed, and he remembered, standing on the ladder and looking out over the deck with the people in it, how he had stood here once before when the ship was in deep space, and how his own courage had run out of him under the weight of that responsibility.

Now he saw Mrs. Fenner's two small children huddled together on their cot, not knowing what the uproar was all about but scared to death by it, and Fenner himself trying to comfort them, and he said to the defiant woman with the fear in her eyes, "I guess in your place I'd have done the same thing."

It was odd that he had never felt quite that protective anguish about Shari. He wondered whether it was some lack in his own emotional equipment, or whether it was because Shari, strange Shari, always seemed so surely in control of her own mind and actions.

Fenner glanced up at Kirby, and then away again. "I couldn't stop her," he said. "She waited until I went out. I didn't know it till afterward."

"Somebody was bound to do it," Kirby said. He shook his head. "Calling R-ships out of the sky to save us. Times sure change, don't they?"

"She didn't have any right to take that on herself!" someone cried shrilly from the back rows of cots. "It was for all of us to decide!"

There was a chorus of assent, quite loud. Mrs. Fenner's tight little jaw sagged down in honest astonishment. She turned around and said indignantly, "But that's what you wanted!"

"It wasn't up to you to do it," said the same voice, and then the owner of it began to cry. "I just can't face another five years out there cooped up in a damned old ship!"

Bedlam.

Mrs. Fenner turned, oddly enough, to Kirby, saying, "But they did want it."

Kirby refrained from making the obvious comment on the difficulty of decision. He only said, "No, in reality they don't want either to go or to stay."

He started to climb the ladder. Wilson caught him.

"Wait, Kirby. Do you think there is a chance?"

Kirby shrugged.

"Well," said Wilson sulkily, "let's find out. I don't want to go back either unless I have to."

Krejewski came up, and Weiss.

"Like old times," Kirby said. "No, you guys have done enough. Stick with the wife and kids."

Weiss said, "This is our world too, Kirby. You can't have all the glory."

"Yeah," said Hanawalt, shoving his way to the ladder. "Suppose you got hurt or something, what would happen to Shari? You can't go alone. And anyway, like Weiss says—"

Suddenly every man in the place wanted to go.

"I'll be damned," said Kirby. He said it several times, and then he said, "Okay. But four'll be enough. Wilson, Weiss, Krejewski, and Hanawalt. You yelled the loudest. Don't blame me."

He went up the ladder, moving like a high school boy, as though he had never been tired in his life. He took hold of Shari and hugged her.

"Humans," he said. "They're crazy. Absolutely plumb idiotic. Let's get some sleep."

They started before the first dawn, when the air was dim and cool and sweet, and it did not seem possible that there was danger anywhere in the world. They carried every piece of equipment they could think of that might be helpful and would not weigh them down, and they were a curiously grim little expedition. The send-off they got was on the grim side too, reflecting the confusion of desires that had turned the ship's company from a cohesive whole into merely a lot of people.

Pop Barstow wished them luck, and then got Kirby off to one side for a minute. "What happens if we don't hear from you before the R-ship lands?"

"You will," Kirby said.

"But if we don't?"

"You'll have to make up your own minds, go or stay."

"Every man for himself," Pop said.

"Yeah. Only you know how that turns out—if one family goes, they all go. Kirby—"

"Yeah."

"You're a stubborn man, young Kirby. An ornery one, too. I just want to ask you, do you believe in what you're doing, or are you risking five other necks beside your own, including your wife's, because you won't give up?"

Kirby looked at the old man, and then at the ground. "I wish you hadn't asked me that, Pop," he said. "Because honest to God, I can't answer it."

He rejoined the others and they went off, following the same route along the watercourse that they had taken on the ill-starred lumbering expedition. The spot in the forest from which Marapese had disappeared seemed to be the logical starting point, if there was any logical starting point.

"Well," said Weiss to Shari, "what do we look for—ten-foot lobster men, intelligent crystals, globes of force, or invisible monsters?" He was trying to be funny, but it did not come off. Shari shook her head.

"I know no more than you." She walked along for a time, very thoughtful, looking away at the forest. "It is strange that I can never get a conscious thought from this source—I mean, an ordinary thought. It must keep its mind well guarded. Unless—"

"Unless," said Weiss, "its mental processes are so alien that your mind can't recognize them at all, unless there's a specific projection like the R-ship's 'brain' that you can fit into your frame of reference."

"You sound like a psychologist," Kirby said.

"A cyberneticist," Weiss said stiffly, "is much the same thing. Only we do it with an electron here and a memory bank there. A machine can think faster and remember more things than a man, and it can perform more functions simultaneously. It is unfailingly accurate. But even a machine has to have a frame of reference, or the information fed to it is meaningless."

"Then you mean," said Kirby, "that it could be thinking away there somewhere and Shari wouldn't be able to get it at all?"

"Even psi powers have their limitations, Kirby. They're not supernatural."

Looking at the forest, Kirby granted. "These are."

"No," said Weiss. "Not in that sense. They may be completely alien and unknown to us, but they still are bound by natural law,

and operating within their own logical frame."

"Sure," said Kirby. "Theoretically. But practically speaking, is that going to help us much?"

"Probably," Weiss admitted, "not much."

THEY tramped along, sometimes silent, sometimes speculating or questioning Shari over and over until she was weary of repeating. The day was perfect of its kind, a segment of full summer with two suns to blaze in the sky and a wind running hot and dry across a thousand miles of prairie to burn their faces a deeper brown. A fine day, a fine country, but emotionally they walked through it in a vacuum, holding everything in abeyance. It was not the time yet for hope, for fear, for anything.

It was the time for walking, and they walked.

In the afternoon a storm blew up from the southwest. They sweated it out crouched under their tarps, and after it was over they wallowed on through the mud to make a camp about where they had stopped before, well clear of the forest. Damp and tired, they huddled around a hopeless little fire and chewed a cold supper, and now for the first time today they had a definite feeling about the expedition.

"What's the use? How can you find something when you don't even know what you're looking for, or where?"

Krejewski said it, and it was shocking to Kirby that it should be so, because Krejewski had always been solid, stolid, cheerful, and matter-of-fact about everything. And because he felt exactly the same way, Kirby said with unnecessary viciousness, "You can go back in the morning, if you want to. You know where the ship is."

A quarrel started then, and they all got in on it, snapping feebly at each other until Shari broke it up. Then, as they rolled up in their blankets, Weiss said,

"If I could only figure out why it wanted to contact the R-ship. That's the key to the business right there. Why had it perceived and remembered, down to the last atom, the cybernetic control-center of the R-ship?"

Hanawalt answered, "It seems to be interested in mechanisms. Remember the chainsaws? I'll bet it has a picture of them, too.

Incidentally, they worked all right again back at the ship."

"Then it—" Weiss hesitated, then blurted out, "It must have damped the atomic batteries."

"Mentally?"

"How else?"

"God," said Hanawalt. "Well, anyway, it didn't kill Marapese." He stressed the word "kill" heavily and hopefully.

"Maybe," said Kirby, "It just wanted to look. It's never seen humans before."

Wilson said uneasily, "It didn't seem to like him very well, the way it shot him back. Maybe the next time—"

"It is possible," said Shari, drowning him out, "that we have one advantage. If its mind is closed to me, perhaps it can't understand our thoughts, either."

"Frame of reference," Weiss pointed out triumphantly. "That's what I said."

Presently they slept, and Kirby dreamed again about the mountain-without-a-face. Only it was different this time, more crudely anthropoid, less symbolic. This time it had hands. It picked up the tiny human figures one by one and examined them and threw them away. It picked up Kirby and lifted him into the air, screaming with terror of the height and the wind that blew there, and it looked into him out of the great muffled darkness of its face until his flesh began to separate from itself most unpleasantly. Then it tossed him away, and he fell and fell and fell until Shari shook him awake to stop his yelling, and it was dawn and time to eat and go on again, into the forest.

"Maybe we ought to hold off," Wilson said, "until we think up some kind of a plan. I mean, what are we going to do when we get there?"

"If I knew," said Kirby, "the chances are I wouldn't go in there at all. And if you can think of a plan, fine. But I don't think we can afford to wait for it."

They loaded themselves and started on, in bright new sunshine that steamed the moisture out of the ground and the cold out of their bones. They would have felt good about it, except that every step brought them closer to the forest, and the trees looked higher and darker and less welcoming by the minute.

Kirby halted at the last possible rim, where the sunlight stopped and the shadows took over. He looked at Shari.

She shook her head. "Nothing."

With the feeling of a man who jumps off a very high cliff into unknown waters, Kirby said, "Let's go."

VI

THE forest had not changed since the last time they saw it. The trees rocked gently, high up, in a breeze they could not feel, and it was all hushed and solemn and self-contained, owing nothing to the mind or the hands of man.

And somewhere in it, hidden away in the very many miles of the woods that spread along the flanks of the mountain range up to the timberline and down again to the verge of the prairie, something waited.

They had an instinctive desire to go softly and not attract anybody's attention. But the litter of fallen twigs and branches trapped their clumsy feet until it sounded to Kirby like a herd of cattle crashing along. He swore at the others, or started to, and then he realized that it did not make any difference. It did not have to hear them to know they were there. And anyway, they were here to find the thing, not hide from it. Crash away. Well, shout, whistle and sing. The sooner the better. The sooner it's over, the sooner to—

To what? Life or death? Freedom? Or the R-ship and the long voyage home, become in their own persons the utter negation of what they had risked so much to prove—man's right to expand his physical horizons as far as his own mind and imagination could push them?

You, you faceless thing in the shadows, you stumbling block, watch out. Man has trampled down better things than you on his way over the mountains—gods and kings, parents and children, cities, nations, races, planets. Who are you to hold us back?

Big words, big words, murmured the restless trees. But before you can trample you must find, and the days are short, and the speed of the R-ship is very great.

They came to the place where they had been before, with the futile axe-marks white

on the one great dark bole, and the memory of fear clinging thick in the shadows.

"Stick close," said Kirby, quite unnecessarily, because they were already treading on one another's feet. "Shari, can't you hear anything yet?"

"The forest is full of voices, but they are all animal. They do not speak thoughts."

Quite unjustifiably, Kirby accused her of not trying. "It reached us here before, strong enough."

"I am doing my best," she answered, on a note of controlled fury he had never heard her use before.

"All right, all right, I'm sorry. I guess we'll have to wait."

They waited. Shari sat cross-legged on the ground. Her eyes were closed, and she was frowning.

Nothing happened.

Shari's frown got deeper, the lines of her body more tense. The men sat down too, close together. Alternately they watched Shari and the spaces under the trees around them.

Time passed.

Nothing happened.

Shari shook her head. She lay back flat on the ground and said, "I'm tired."

Kirby patted her. "Get some rest. You can try again later."

She looked up at him. "I don't understand it. The whole forest knows we are here. Many creatures are watching us—oh, little creatures, Kirby, nothing to be afraid of. Some are alarmed, and some are only curious, but none of them think. I can't touch any intelligence."

She rolled over, hiding her face in her folded arms. "It's no good," she said dismally. "Its mind is too well guarded. I have not the skill nor the strength to break that barrier."

Kirby looked across her at the others. Hanawalt said, "Well, it was a good try. Now what?"

"Try and find that swamp, I guess."

"The swamp," said Krejewski. "Why?"

"Well, it took Marapese there, didn't it?"

Kirby said. "That must be where it holds out—there, or close to it."

"Marapese didn't see anything."

"It must have hidden from him. Or maybe it's something he wouldn't recognize as

being alive if he did see it." Kirby picked up bits of twigs and threw them down again hard, one by one, into the mat of leaves. "Besides, remember what he said about falling over things, and then they weren't there? Doesn't that sound like teleportation? It must have been close by, playing with him."

They thought about that. Finally Wilson said, "Yeah, but even so, how are we going to find that swamp? It could be anywhere."

"Well," said Kirby, "I figure—"

"Look," said Wilson, "I'll lay it on the line, I asked to come here, didn't I? I wanted to find this thing just as much as you, didn't I? And we figured Shari could do it. Okay. So it didn't turn out that way, and I've got a wife and kids to think of. I'm not going to go blundering around in this forest looking for something that may be a hundred miles away, and maybe not being able to find my way back in time. If Sally and the kids go aboard that ship, I'm going to be there too."

Kirby nodded slowly. He looked from Wilson to Krejewski and Hanawalt and Weiss. "I guess you feel the same way."

Weiss stared uncomfortably at the ground. "If there was more time, or we had any idea where the place was—"

"Yeah," said Kirby.

"After all," Hanawalt said, "you know how you'd feel if Shari was back there waiting."

"Sure," said Kirby. He got up and went away from them, between the trees. When he was out of sight he sat down again and put his head in his hands. He heard them calling after him, but he did not answer. He did not feel angry with them. He just did not want to be around them for a while.

HE SAT there a long time, not thinking about anything, feeling low and beyond caring any more. The shadows shifted as the twin suns climbed higher in the sky. It was hot, with the breathless unstirring heat of deep woods on a summer day. After a while the pangs of hunger began to nag at him. Oh hell, he thought, what's the use? He got up and started back to join the others, and he had not taken more than half a dozen steps when he heard Wilson give a yelp like a schoolgirl who finds a mouse in

her slipper. A shocker crackled, and then two more, very briefly. Then there was nothing but a confusion of voices, out of which emerged Krejewski's bull bellow, shouting Kirby's name. Kirby began to run.

They were all standing together, looking wildly around. Perhaps six feet away a long unpleasant thing that had not been able to decide whether to be a lizard or a snake lay flapping its jaws and squirming feebly. Hanawalt was still pointing his shocker at it and futilely pressing the stud.

"It won't work," he said.

"None of them will, Kirby, it's found us. The minute we used the shockers on that brute—" Wilson waved his own inoperative weapon under Kirby's nose. "It stopped them."

"All right," said Kirby. "Calm down. What happened?"

"That thing," said Wilson, pointing. "It crawled right up on my foot before I saw it."

"Did Shari—" Kirby started to say, and then stopped. "Where is Shari?"

"Right here. At least she was a minute ago. When it stopped the shockers she kind of groaned, and then she ran off a little bit that way, northwest. She said that's where the thing was. She didn't go far, only a step or two. She's right here."

Kirby took a step or two that way himself, and then a lot more, shouting, calling, tearing into the shadows and the thorny fastnesses of windfalls. Once he thought he saw something peering at him through a curtain of vines but when he got there there was nothing.

And Shari was gone.

"Just like Marapee," said Weiss. He shivered, and Wilson said quickly,

"He wasn't hurt, Kirby. He got back all right."

"Yeah," said Kirby. "Sure." He stood still, with his hands clenched up and all the color run out of his face under the tan so it looked like a piece of dead wood. And he was thinking about a lot of things, about Shari saying, Where you are concerned my choice is never free, and about Pop Barstow asking him a question he could not answer.

The others watched him, shocked and silent, afraid to speak, as though it were somehow their fault that this had happened.

Kirby said, "Go back to the ship. I don't want you on my conscience, too."

He started to pick up the things he had laid aside. His fingers shook like an old man's.

"What are you going to do?" asked Wilson.

"Find her."

"We'll go with you."

"Get back to your families," Kirby said fiercely. "Tell Pop he was right. Go home."

He went away in the direction Shari had gone, half running, ripping and floundering by main strength through vines and undergrowth. The others looked after him for a minute, and then at each other. Wilson muttered, "Maybe it's not too far. Another day won't matter."

They followed Kirby.

Kirby neither knew nor cared. He went on his way like a charging bull until he could not go any farther, and then he sat for a while on the ground, his head bent forward over his knees and his flanks heaving. After that he took it slower, but he did not stop again until it got dark and he fell over a big branch into a drift of leaves and stayed there. The others, searching carefully with their lights, came up with him about an hour later and built a fire, rousing him enough to get some food in him. He was up before dawn and gone again, and again they followed, lagging even farther behind because Kirby had got his second wind and was going now at a pace that was steady but fast, so that only a driven man could keep up with it.

The long hot day drew on to another night, and there was no swamp and no sign of Shari.

Over the campfire Wilson said, "She may be back at the ship by now. Like Marapese."

"Maybe," Kirby said. "Maybe not."

"Look, we've got to start back in the morning."

"I told you to go, a long while back."

"But we can't leave you alone up here, Kirby. It wouldn't be right."

"Go on," said Kirby. "Thanks. You're good guys. But I told you, go on."

He went to sleep, and so did they. In the morning he was gone, and this time they did not follow but turned their faces reluctantly toward the plain.

"If Shari's there when we get back," said Hanawalt, "we can let him know by radio. We ought to be able to get that much of a message through."

"Sure," said Wilson. "Or maybe he'll find her soon and they can catch up with us."

"Sure," said Krejewski. "He'll be okay."

They were all liars.

Kirby had ceased to think about them. He was already miles away, moving in as straight a line as he could make it by compass, angling in toward the foothill slopes of a great saddle peak. He was not clearly aware of anything except the need to keep going toward Shari. He kept her name and his thoughts about her clear on the top of his mind so that if she was still alive she might hear them and know that he was coming. Twice, with a sort of animal cunning, he used his shocker in the hopes that it might teleport him, too, if he attracted its attention. But all it did was to damp the current in his shocker and ignore him.

He spent that night alone, lying where he happened to be when darkness overtook him.

He had neither food nor fire. It was not that he was too tired or distraught to bother. He simply did not think of them. He slept like a dead man, without dreams, and was away again with the first gray gleam. The forest seemed queer and misty. He thought vaguely that the mist would clear as the sun rose, but it did not, and after a while he realized that he was carrying the mist himself, inside his head. Distances became uncertain. Sometimes a tree that seemed no more than twenty feet away would take him half an hour to get to. He tested his mind frequently to make sure it was still functioning clearly, reciting whole passages of the Spaceman's Manual and the Laws of Astrogation. As long as he could remember those, he knew he was all right.

What he did not know was that he had reached the borders of the swamp. It was not until he fell down that he noticed it. He was used to falling down, and it did not bother him any more, but this time he went headfirst into a slough of muddy water. The shock was startling. He scrambled up, shaking his head and gasping, and some of his

wits fell back into their proper places. Cautiously he looked around.

There was a low piece of land close by, with a huge dead tree on it shooting up stark and white, dangling fringes of pale moss from what was left of its limbs. Shari was standing beside it, looking at him. She had something in her arms.

"Shari," he whispered, and then shut his eyes. When he opened them she was still there. He started to shout and run toward her, making a mighty churning of the water, and she held up one hand and said, "Softly, softly! Oh Kirby, be careful."

She was muddy, as Marapese had been, from head to foot, and her face showed chalk-white where the streaks didn't cover it. The thing in her arms was muddy too. It moved, and she stroked it. "Oh, Kirby," she murmured, and then she sat down carefully on the muddy ground and began to cry.

Kirby moved toward her, not speaking nor making any more noise than he could help. He got out of the water and crouched down in front of her. The thing she was holding gurgled and snorted in a contented, infantile way. "Beloved," said Shari, no louder than a whisper, "how I have waited for you!" And the thing thrust out a moist little snout and nuzzled Kirby's hand.

VII

"WHAT—" Kirby started to ask.

Shari said softly, "Don't frighten her or she'll 'port you away."

"That?" said Kirby.

"This," said Shari, with complete solemnity.

Sitting still as a rock, Kirby stared at Shari and then at the fat, pinkish, lubberly creature in her arms, the four-footed and utterly animal creature with the expression of happy imbecility. He tried several times, and finally the words came out, carefully subdued.

"Are you trying to tell me—"

Shari nodded.

"But it's only a baby. Isn't it?"

"Yes. But she can do as much as an adult, except that her range is short and her power not so great. Kirby, the thing we were looking for is not a single individual, it's a breed, a herd, a whole species.

They're—" she shook her head. "They're absolutely incredible."

It occurred to Kirby then to ask Shari if she was all right. Really all right. And she began to cry again. "I followed you all the way here, beloved, with my mind, and I tried so hard to make you hear me."

"If you are all right it doesn't matter." Kirby meant it. Nothing mattered. Not stars nor colonies nor R-ships. "What happens if I—"

"Gently, and I'll think her happy thoughts, and she'll love it."

Kirby took Shari and the pinkish creature into his arms. That was when it all came over him and his insides dissolved into a whirling chaos. It got dark, and through the darkness he could hear the creature gurgling. He began to laugh, and Shari began to laugh, and in a minute or two the darkness cleared. Kirby said, "You're all right, really?" And she answered, "At first I was terrified. And then I began to understand. After that, it was just making friends and waiting for you."

Kirby sat back on the mud. "I don't understand at all," he said. "To me she just looks moronic."

"She is."

"But—"

"They are. The whole species. That is why I could not find the intelligence I was searching for. There is none. The species do not—"

"The what?"

"I suppose I have been calling them that in my mind, since ESP is their distinguishing characteristic. Whatever you call them, they do not think. They only feel."

"But they can see inside of atoms."

Rather impatiently, Shari said, "All animals can see the world they live in. They do not necessarily understand it. Do you suppose a bird knows or cares what makes a tree grow, or that those hoofed ones out there on the prairie comprehend the wind or the shining of the suns?"

"No," said Kirby, "I guess not. But—"

"But these see farther than the others, that's all." Shari stroked the small species and made her kick with pleasure. "I think it is one of Mother Nature's mistakes over this world. She has not yet managed to evolve an intelligent species, but she has tried, and

this is one of her efforts. She experimented with a psi mutation, but whether she chose the wrong physical form to put it into or whether the psi power itself stopped mental development by removing the need for it—if you can fell a tree by thinking about it, why invent the axe?—it was a complete dead end."

She rose. "Come, I will show you. Walk quietly, and above all don't use any mechanism. They're sensitive to any release of energy, and it frightens them. As soon as Marapese used his power-torch, they sent him away. They're very timid."

Still not believing it, Kirby said, "Is that why they damped the atomic batteries and stopped radio transmission?"

"Yes. Their reflexes—"

The infant espee vanished cleanly from her arms in the middle of a grunt.

"—are very simple," Shari finished.

"Simple," said Kirby. "Oh, yes. Very."

They walked, sinking in the mud, wading in shallow water. It was quiet and hot, and the shafts of the dead trees stood up like the white pillars of some long-forgotten temple, hung with votive offerings of moss.

"It must have been one of them that Wilson saw. Teleported, of course. That's why it didn't make any noise coming or going. I guess it came to look us over, and got scared when we yelled. Is that why they took Marapese, just to see what he was like?"

"They're curious," Shari said. "That's why they took me. I was different from the others."

"Different?"

"Female."

"Oh."

In the quiet, there was a sudden feeling of activity. Clumps of reed shook where there was no wind. Things plopped and swirled in the water. Out of nowhere a small pink-and-mud-colored form appeared under Kirby's feet, tripped him, and flickered out like a picture when the film breaks. From then on the walk turned strange. The air was full of gurgles, grunts, and pleased little snortings, but the bodies they belonged to moved so fast that they left the sounds eerily behind. Spouts of water flew up and drenched the two humans. Objects—twigs, berries, clots of mud, live fish, startled frogs

—pelted them out of the clear air. Kirby began to get mad.

"The young ones like to play," said Shari. "They never really hurt—"

She disappeared. Kirby shouted, and then the ground was pulled out from under him. There was a flash so brief he only sensed it, and he was up to his neck in water in the middle of a herd of great somnolent beasts, the adult espees wallowing comfortably in warmth and idleness, hardly bothering to notice him.

SHARI appeared in a clump of reeds and beckoned to him. He began to swim, very gently so as not to startle the creatures, and a feeling of helpless and frightened wrath brought him almost to the verge of tears. These great half-witted brutes could, if they wanted to, transport him a hundred miles away in the bat of an eyelash, and there was nothing he could do about it.

They did not choose to, and he made the reeds. Holding tight to Shari's hand, lest she vanish again, he looked at the hippopotamoid forms and wondered, "How come Marapese didn't see them when he was here?"

"They hid from him. I told you they were timid. Now they are more used to humans, and besides I have spent all these days teaching them not to fear us." She sighed wearily. "They are so stupid. They cannot read thoughts. But I made them feel that we are friends."

She shook her head in a kind of agony. "Oh, Kirby, the knowledge that is locked up in those great thick heads! If they understood only a fraction of it they would be like gods. And how do they use this power? Look."

She pointed to where an adult lay on his side, half in water, half on a bank of warm mud. A heap of succulent grass flicked into being a few inches from his nose. He lay with his mouth open and the grasses crawled into it. Kirby got the feeling that the beast only bothered to chew them because the taste was pleasant.

"They can shift atoms," Shari said. "They can hold the unstable ones down so there is no emission of particles. In fact, they have complete mental control over matter, and they can do all these things singly or

as a group with enormous potential. And in this way they feed themselves and repel their enemies and keep their wallows just the right temperature, all without the slightest effort. It isn't fair! Men have labored so hard for centuries to learn just a little of what they are born with, and never understand!"

"I don't know," said Kirby. "Maybe our Mother Nature was smarter. She made us work."

He sat for some time, watching the heap of fodder move obediently into the waiting mouth. When it was all gone the espee sighed a mighty sigh, rumbled twice, and rolled over on his back to sleep.

Kirby said, "They're not dangerous."

"No. Oh, in a panic they might do harm, but not otherwise."

"Then the message from the R-ship was a lie."

"Yes. They hamper human activity as soon as it invades their forest, but the simple remedy for that is to stay away. They are lazy and unaggressive. Only an extremely great stimulus of fear would cause them to use their power as far away as the *Lucy Davenport*. Of course, the people who sent that message may not know that it's untrue."

"I doubt if they care," said Kirby bitterly. "But I see what you mean. When RSS-1 orbited over this part of the forest the espees probably blanked all the recording devices, so nothing showed up at all. There may be other swamps with other espees, too, and from the holes in the record the Government technicians would guess there was something peculiar here, but not what."

He looked at his watch, and then at the sky, and said, "So now we have the truth, and what good does it do us? It's too late. The R-ship will land in approximately thirty minutes. We haven't a hope—"

He stopped. Shari gave him a look of alarm.

"No," she said, "They are uncontrollable and unpredictable. They—"

"They sent Marapese back, didn't they?"

"Pure chance. They could send us anywhere, and it might not be together."

"Listen," said Kirby, "the ship will land, and the people will all get into it and go. Do you understand what that will mean for us?"

"But," said Shari, "I think—" She looked at the espees and moaned. "Intelligence one may bargain with, or reason with, or at the very least one may guess what the course of action may be. But with such imbeciles, who can say?"

Kirby pulled her to her feet. "We'll go back to the edge of the swamp, in the direction of the ship. It may give them the idea. I'll use the field radio. I may be able to get a message through to Fenner before they stop it, or they may port us within reach of the ship. Or both. Anyway, we can hardly be worse off. Come on."

She hesitated, still doubtful. Then she touched Kirby's arm and whispered, "Look."

The sleeping espee had waked again. He heaved himself over and raised his head as though to listen. A second later he snorted uneasily and was gone.

An expression of apprehension came into Shari's face. "Yes," she said. "We must go."

Out in the warm water the great bodies stirred and shifted, as if some sudden current had disturbed them. Then they, too, disappeared.

Shari began to move fast away from the water, through the reeds.

"What's the matter?" Kirby asked.

"They have caught the first vibrations from the R-ship."

"Oh lord," said Kirby, and began to run.

They came out on a sunny bank. A shoal of the young espees lay snoring together in the mud, worn out by their frolic, and Kirby asked, "How far did the little demons send us, anyway?"

"I don't know. Half a mile, more." She fled past the young ones. Kirby followed. They splashed through a slough, and then Shari pointed back at the bank. Some of the small espees were already gone. Others vanished while he watched, flick-flick-flick. In no more than a second, the bank was empty.

"They have gone back to the herd," said Shari, and plucked his sleeve. "Come, Kirby. Hurry."

She had forgotten all about not running or making too much noise. It seemed that that no longer mattered. They hurried together through the swamp, and once again their passage acquired a strangeness. This time it was not the overt acts of the young

ones. This was different. This was quiet, and tightening all the time until even the non-sensitive Kirby could feel each nerve stretched and singing like a fiddle string.

FINALLY he stopped of his own accord and listened. The silence ached in his ears. It was not merely a negation of sound. It was a force in itself, a positive thing. And there was something behind it. He felt it as a man feels the bulking potential of a tornado in the first capful of wind.

"They have gathered," Shari whispered. "They are all together now."

She rushed away again, with her hands on either side of her head. Her face was white. Kirby caught up with her. He stopped her and said, "We can't go any farther, there isn't time. We'll have to try it from here."

"No," she said. "No, Kirby, don't!" She started to say something more, and then she crumpled down on the ground, all curled up and moaning. "Too close, too strong, I can't shut it out, Kirby, Kirby!"

He got down beside her and pulled her up so that she was lying across his knees. She clipped her arms around him tight and pressed her head in against his chest. Kirby's heart was pounding, fast and hard. He unslung the field radio from its strap across his shoulder, and reached for the switch.

Shari lifted her head. She screamed and grabbed for his wrist. He struck her hands away. The switch clicked. "Fenner! Fenner, this is Kirby. Don't—"

Static, a roar and a crash that split his ears. The radio flew out of his hands and smashed to bits against a tree. Shari screamed again. He caught hold of her, not so much to save her as to save himself. Then something hit him, as the earth hits a crashing ship.

He was rolling over on the prairie. There was dust in his mouth. He was still hanging on to Shari. He saw her dark hair fly as they tumbled over and over, saw it grow dun-colored in the dust. They fell apart and stopped rolling and lay there, and after a while, without moving, Shari whispered, "I tried to warn you. They were afraid and angry, all together. They might have killed us."

"They weren't gentle." Kirby pushed

himself up, until he was sitting. "But they were strong, all right. Too strong. Look."

Shari crawled to him. No more than a mile away the *Lucy B. Davenport* lay in the bright sunlight. They could see the people gathered near her, a dark blot on the lighter soil. They could see the pattern of the plowed land with the flush of green deepening on it from the sprouting crops, and they could see the sawmill and the streets that were going to be, with the square stone beginnings of the houses that were also to be. Only a mile, but it might as well have been ten or a hundred, because the river was between them, and three quarters of that mile was water.

And the R-ship was coming down.

They could see it glittering in the high blue air, huge and cold and unconcerned, doing the thing it had been told to do without emotion or the flicker of a thought. Inside its shining hull the innumerable relays clicked and whirled, the radar impulses telling the control centers its exact altitude and rate of fall, the control centers regulating the thrust of the landing jets, and farther in, deep in, sealed off in perfect safety but sending its spreading ganglia to every farthest corner of the ship, the great electronic brain presided, overseeing every action, evaluating every datum transmitted to it by its sensory members, orienting the total effort of the ship and all its parts toward the fulfillment of the code commands set up immovably on the master tapes, recorded inexorably on the master dials.

The shining robot sank, and the people waited beside the *Lucy Davenport*, the old ship about to be robbed of her glory. And across the river Kirby watched and did nothing because there was nothing he could do.

Shari whispered, "Wait. Look there!"

The R-ship's landing-jets burst out in violent flame and thunder. It hovered uncertainly for as long as a man might draw two breaths before it started down again.

Kirby stiffened. He started to speak, but Shari's hand was tight on his arm and she had that far-off listening look he had come to know.

Again the RSS-2 halted in its downward flight, a silver bubble poised on a pillar of fire.

Shari said, "Now I understand."

Kirby sprang up. "What is it? What's happening?"

"Watch—"

The landing jets cut out abruptly. The thunder stilled, and the trembling of the ground. The RSS-2 hung momentarily in mid-air, incredibly unsupported. Then it vanished.

Even at that distance Kirby could hear the cry that went up from the waiting crowd. It came thin and faint across the water, and Shari said, in a tone of absolute horror, "Oh Kirby, if they had not thought us to be another R-ship, what might have happened!"

Kirby pointed in an agony of excitement. "There it comes again."

RSS-2 was returning, relentlessly obedient to the commands it had crossed 4.3 light years of space to fulfil.

"Even together they cannot release enough energy to teleport so great a mass very far away. Now watch!"

The ship came down as it had before, on the howling jets. And this time they did not cut off.

Kirby said, "They can't stop it."

"Wait. Oh, if I could make you see it! They learned every atom of the controlling brain when the first R-ship passed over them, photographing. They repelled it. When the *Lucy* landed, they tried to repel her the same way, but because the controlling brain was human they could not manipulate it, and the landing was made before their stupid minds could grasp the difference and try damping the electrical systems independently. Now they are on familiar ground again—and I can see—"

She broke off, holding her head once more between her hands, but this time she was laughing in a sheer hysteria of excitement.

"It makes me dizzy. There is no perspec-

tive, the whole brain, the little transistors, the atoms, the electrons streaming, all are the same. The atoms shift, some of them, and all the time they dance and spin. The electron streams are broken up, moving in a different way—and now the needles on the dials move too, and on the code tapes a layer of atoms less than a micron deep is stretched to make them blank—this time they know the right combination. Before they must have tried endless permutations to find the relay system that controls the order to go away— There! The tapes are blank, the circuits are closed off and by-passed. The master dial has moved to—"

The RSS-2 staggered, swooped down like a bird wounded in flight, and then, bathed in mighty fires, it regained its balance and roared upward into the bright sky.

"—return-to-base," finished Shari, on a note of anti-climax.

Kirby watched until the silver shape had dwindled to a speck, and then to nothing. Across the river the people watched too, stunned into silence. Kirby laughed, and then he sat down because he was too weak to stand up and laugh both.

"They took care of it," he said.

"Yes. The first one frightened them terribly. They remembered."

"I guess they're our friends, then, even if they don't know it."

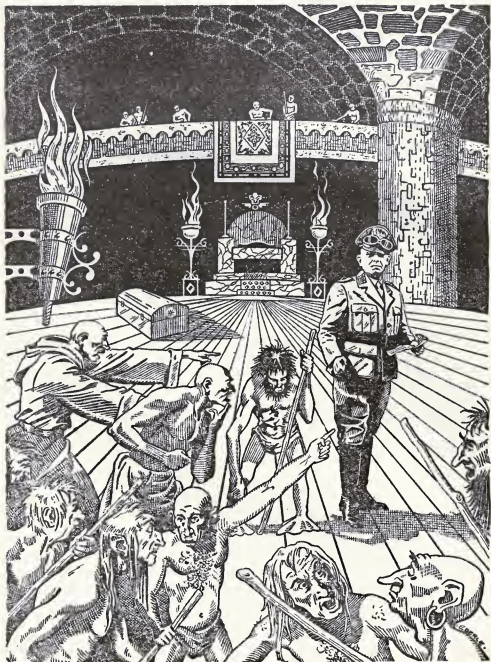
Shari said, "They will know it in time. They'll learn that we are friends. We have only to let them completely alone until they do learn it."

Kirby looked at her. "No one will be going back now. We'll still have the world we planned—all of us."

He took her into his arms. "And just as well. For a while there, I thought—but you and I are getting a little too old to be a satisfactory Adam and Eve!"

The Grave of Solon Regh

By CHAS. A. STEARNS



*Among the miserable Ghels of southern Mars George
Seeling ventured—ready to share his fearless feats
with all the world—but hardly ready to share
the grave of Solon Regh.*

GEORGE SEELING was one of the most personable ghouls you would ever care to meet. When he disappeared three years ago, somewhere in the unexplored wilderness of southern Mars, his loss was mourned not only by the Terran Museum of Natural History, for whom he worked, but by a multitude of lovers of adventure by proxy, as well, who kept up with his astounding fortunes through their daily papers.

For George Seeling, who feared nothing that walked, crawled, flew, or pulsed, and who owned, moreover, a shining pair of seven league boots, in the form of an inexhaustible expense account, believed in sharing himself with the public. He adored publicity.

There was the time, for instance, that he made off with the crown jewels of the Tsarn Princess of Ganymede. The people loved it. All of them excepting, of course, the Ganymedians. They were considerably upset, but being a minority group, there was not much that they could do, once Seeling had escaped with the jewels.

Then there was the celebrated occasion of his robbing the crypts of Nakor, the Moon Goddess of Io. From Io he swiped several golden idols of inestimable value, which was just as well, for they were not doing the natives the least bit of good, despite their complaints. It almost caused an international incident, but the Museum kept the treasure, and their procurer collected a fat commission.

This, as one can readily see, demonstrates graphically that George Seeling felt almost as much at home in tombs as he did in the public eye.

The south of Mars is a rugged land of naked, red peaks and deep, impassable canyons; of reed-filled swamp lands and barren plateaus. The people who live there are primitive, and thin as greyhounds, but of a shy, gentle nature, with huge, dark, melting eyes set deep in leathery, purplish skin, and nervous, splayed bare feet that can pad

the sands of the uplands at incredible speed.

To George Seeling the ghels were merely an incidental impression to add to the menagerie of weird people from many worlds that already stuffed his brain and made him rather a cosmopolitan with regard to alien cultures. He had already spent several weeks on Mars; most of it in Parthena, the chief spaceport of southern Mars, where he haunted the bars of the native district, asking, seeking, wheedling, bribing, until he found what he sought—a man who could lead him to one of the old cities that lay hidden back in the hills.

So it came about that he landed himself and his guide in a rented 'copter on a certain, uncharted mountainside to the south and west of Parthena.

Through the field glasses, the minarets of the city were just visible, but it was impossible to get any closer for there was no place to land. The old Martians had been averse to flat roofs, a circumstance which led Seeling to doubt, audibly, that they could have had the sense of an addled eel.

After loading himself down with the paraphernalia that explorers are supposed to carry, he went on alone, the guide declining an invitation to accompany him.

It was almost dark when he stumbled over the first bit of masonry—some prehistoric curbstone, perhaps. He had walked for hours in a tangled forest of giant reeds, and the suddenness of his discovery startled him.

He had wandered right into the midst of the abandoned city without even knowing it. Such was the customary luck of George Seeling. He could see shadowy outlines of some of the eroding old towers from where he stood, but he knew it was too late in the evening to explore them safely. He had waited this long; it wouldn't hurt to wait through one more short, Martian night.

He found a clearing near a roofless columnar tower and spread his sleeping bag beneath its wall. He went to sleep elated

with his good fortune, and slept dreamlessly, and without disturbance.

But then, it took a great deal to disturb George Seeling when he slept.

IN THE morning the ghels were there. There were about a dozen of them, silently squatting in a semi-circle about his camp, contemplating him at a respectful distance with their soulful, gazelle eyes.

There is something disconcerting about waking up and finding that one has acquired uninvited guests, but Seeling never turned a hair. He reached over and grabbed his rifle, but the ghels never moved. They looked, for all the world, like purple-brown graven images squatting there, except that the round, black eyes blinked once in a while.

The ghel tongue was a very rudimentary one, and Seeling, who was naturally adept at such things, had studied it at some length during the weeks in Parthena. He felt that he could get along.

"I greet you," he said, still fondling his rifle. "I am an Earthman."

"We know," one of the ghels said in a curious, whistling voice. "What do you want here?"

"I come to see the city," George said.

"This is the sacred dead city of Solon Regh, the wisest of the ancient ones. We do not welcome visitors here."

"It's not your city, dammit," George said.

"What did you say?"

"Sorry, I said, this is not the work of your race. Why do you care if I look around?"

"It is a shrine. The old ones took care of us before they went away. We loved them, and do not want their dead disturbed."

George Seeling grinned with delight. He never enjoyed himself so much as when he was where he wasn't supposed to be.

"We would be very sad if the dead were desecrated," the ghel said.

"Umm," said Seeling impudently, "but what would you do if I went ahead and desecrated them anyway?"

The lead ghel looked shocked. He turned his saucer eyes on his companions, and they all squirmed on their haunches and looked shocked too.

"We would be very sad," the ghel answered.

"No hard feelings," George Seeling said, "but if the advancement of science and the dispersal of knowledge were left up to you fellows, the world would be in a hell of a fix." He aimed his rifle suggestively at the ghel's chest. "Do you know what this is that I am pointing at you?"

"It is a death stick. We have seen them before."

"Right. Now, there's something you can do for me," and I'll take it very kindly if you cooperate."

"Kindness is something we understand."

"That's fine. Somewhere about here are the tombs of the old race. All the legends of Mars tell about the wealth of the ancients, and I hear this Solon Regh was sort of a Martian King Tut. Lead me there, and I'll be kind enough to spare your life."

The ghels all blinked their eyes rapidly. Seeling fancied that there would have been tears in their eyes, except that ghels have no tear glands. He felt a little sorry for them.

"Come with us," the leader of the ghels said.

SEELING was properly impressed. He had seen enough of the old cultures of the planets to realize that here, indeed, was something special. The walls loomed high above his head, shutting out the light of the morning sun as he walked down the street canyons where the vegetation had not yet penetrated. The ghels padded on ahead of him.

There was a musty smell about the place. Most appropriate. And the old timers had quite a flair for architecture, he thought. The masonry was a kind of cemented substance that was nearly as hard as granite. The weather had eroded it into a lovely, pearly grayness that was satiny smooth to the touch. He stroked the walls lovingly, and wished that he could transport the whole place back to Earth.

At the end of one street a bright yellow kral snake struck at him and he killed it with the butt of his rifle. They encountered no other life. Everywhere there was silence.

The ghels made several turns through narrow passageways, and all at once Seeling

was face to face with the most breathtaking sight he had ever beheld.

In a great, hidden courtyard the palace lay. It was at least six hundred feet high, from massive base to delicate multiple pinnacles that festooned the arched roof. The facade was inscribed with countless lacy designs, set into the mother masonry with snowy white stones.

The great arched doorway gaped open invitingly to the kind of darkness that Seeling found most exciting.

The ghels stopped. "You are certain that you will not change your mind?"

"Look here," Seeling said. "I've come here to collect artifacts, or anything I can lay my hands on for my people on Earth. If I don't bring something good back, they'll send others who won't be as patient with you as I am."

"That is sad, indeed, for the Radiance that made us still lingers in the castle," said the ghel.

"I'm not going to hurt His Radiant Majesty, whoever he is," Seeling said. "What I want is junk—stuff that you never use anyhow. So let's get on with it."

George Seeling was panting by the time he had climbed to the top of the central tower. He had always thought of a tomb as some damp, dark hole beneath the surface of the ground, for such had been his experience many times before. But the resting place of Solon Regh the Wise was a large, light room, not half so eerie as the big throne room below, for instance.

It took him five minutes to work the mechanism of the outer door. When he got it open he went in and found a convenient coffin to sit on, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and indulged in a cigarette before continuing.

The room had no windows, but there was light coming in from the great transparent dome of roof. A cheerful place, he thought, for a crypt. There were six coffins in the room, neatly arranged around its periphery. He wondered which one was Solon Regh's.

All of the biers were plain, untarnished metal—a silvery alloy he couldn't quite identify. Upon one of them there was a modest crest, or symbol. That one, he decided, must be the coffin of Solon Regh.

He was feeling a little ill. A headache from the altitude, he thought. Or perhaps he'd caught a touch of the fever. Better to get it over with and get out of here. All the pleasure of discovery was gone now.

He took out his array of chisels and went to work on the coffin, which yielded easily to his professional looter's touch. The lid was light and slid aside soundlessly.

George Seeling came face to face with Solon Regh. The relics of Regh the Wise seemed to be in perfect condition. Over all lay a semi-transparent coating of a waxy substance—the preservative, he supposed. The figure was as large as his own. The old race must have been much closer, genetically, to his own than the ghels.

But Seeling was not concerned with any of this. He flopped Solon Regh over on his belly without ceremony and examined the bottom of the coffin. It was no use. No treasure here. He did find something, however. The ring on Solon Regh's finger. He chipped off the preservative, slid the ring off and put it in his pocket. Then he examined the other coffins. Wives, perhaps, and dignitaries of court, these had been. There were both male and female. But no jewelry.

He searched the room carefully, but there was nothing to be found. It had not been their custom, then, to bury their treasures with the dead—or perhaps the ghels had taken it. No matter, he knew the futility of looking further.

When a race chose to hide its treasures, rather than try to take them along to the happy hunting grounds, they usually did a good job. He remembered searching in vain for a solid year in the catacombs of Neptune once.

His face was burning with some inner fire now; he knew that he must have a high fever. He felt much worse. But to go back empty handed!

And suddenly he knew that he would not.

He took the steps back down to the throne room three at a time, for he felt, strangely, that he must hurry. The ghels were still waiting for him there in the gloom. There seemed to be more of them now, but he didn't bother to count.

"I want eight of you," he said. "You are to come with me up to the crypts. I'm

taking the coffin of Solon Regh back with me, and you are going to carry it. I don't want any arguments. I'll pay you whatever you want, but it's got to be done right away."

THEY were not a strong race, the ghels, and the box was without handles, but they finally got it to their shoulders. Twice coming down the spiraling staircases they slipped, and he cursed them furiously, then was amazed that he could be so distraught.

They carried it down to the throneroom and set it down. The big rotunda was full of ghels by this time; hundreds of them.

"What the hell is this?" George Seeling said, and his voice sounded thick to him. "If you're going to start trouble—I'll kill the first ghel that lays a hand on me or the coffin."

He waited for an answer. There was not a sound among the dark multitude of ghels. They watched him, sorrowfully.

"Well?" Seeling bellowed.

The ghel who had talked with him before said, "We are gathered here for a telling. Will you crouch there and hear us?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Please hear us."

Seeling looked around him. Better not to antagonize them at that, he supposed, since it seemed that they had no intentions, at present, of doing anything drastic.

He waited.

"Long ago," the ghel said, "there were the old ones. They were as gods, and knew great magic. All was happiness. But the magic was not great enough, for one day there came invaders from beyond the stars, and sprayed the cities with green fire that was so light that its touch could not be felt, and yet it killed in great numbers—and the rest it changed."

"Solon Regh, who was wise, took his family about him and hid in the tower

behind air-tight doors where the green fire could not come. Many weeks he stayed there, with an air purifier to keep out the radiance, and let in fresh air, and at last the enemy left. The ones who were left had changed more and more, so that even in their heads they were affected, and could scarcely take care of themselves.

"Solon Regh, from behind his steel door, where the pure air was, sorrowed for us, and counseled us to pick up our lives as best we could. He did not dare come out because the radiance did not leave, but hung about the palace. We did not care any more. We knew the radiance would always be there, but it could not hurt us now. Solon Regh and his family did all they could for us, and remembered all the wonderful knowledge that we had forgotten. They tried to teach us, but we had forgotten how to learn, too."

"We? We?" George Seeling screamed. "What are you talking about?"

"We ghels. Do you not understand? *We* were the old ones."

"Oh, God!" George said.

"The Radiance is still in the buildings. That is what we tried to tell you before. But it is too late now. It has touched you."

"Let me out of here!" Seeling sobbed. "I won't be changed by any damned radiation. I'll go back to Earth. They'll help me. They'll know what to do. He-help me, dammit!"

"You will not go back," the ghel said. "I am sorry, but you really cannot go back like this; you will be more at home here from now on."

All the ghels looked at George Seeling with sad, limpid stares. They were silent. There wasn't any more to be said. Nothing that they could think of.

And George Seeling, squatting there, gazed back at them with big, saucer eyes.



BOTTOM IS UP

By RAYMOND E. BANKS

Pismo Bates was a miserable janitor, and Onsko was a park-sleeping Martian bum. But between 'em they merrily pondered—and settled—the greater Cosmic frictions.

"BOY," said Pismo Bates, the Earth-man.

"Oh, boy," said Onsko, the Martian. He opened the lid of his stone jar and studied the contents. "Man," said Onsko, "you Earth guys really can drink. Look at that jar."

Bates looked. He shuddered. "You mean we drank all that green stuff, boy?"

"We sure did, boy," said Onsko. He, too,

shivered under the double Martian moons. He drew his dirty white rags about his thin, somewhat Earth-like body. Bates, smoothing at the wrinkles of his green uniform, stared at him.

"If your income is one hundred and fifty thousand sicks a month," said Bates, "how come you sleep in this here park and go around dressed in an old bed sheet?"

Onsko laughed. He waved a hand at the

tall, graceful buildings of Stalup, Capitol city of Mars. "I earned it, man. I used to be Prince of Mars and had to sleep in a big house with a big bed and with servant guys all around. I used to have to keep a siren woman happy, and they only paid me forty-two dollars and fifty cents a month."

Bates grinned at him pityingly. "You got a great sense of humor, Onsko. Me, I usta be president of Yale. But if you get all that money how come you ain't got a siren woman now?"

Onsko grinned, baring his dirty teeth. "Funny thing, boy," he said. "Soon as I could afford siren women, I kinda lost the urge; soon as I knew I could buy me any one I wanted."

"Sure you did," said Pismo. "Only how come you ain't even got two or three Martian sicks on you to spend for more green stuff tonight?"

Onsko sighed. "I just let 'em keep putting the money in the bank for me," he said. "When you got lots, you don't wanta bother with it. That's how rich I am."

The danger warnings howled throughout the city, making the deserted park mystic and fearful. Bates sat up quickly.

"What's that?"

"Your Earth space ships," said Onsko. "The Prince of Mars ain't gonna let 'em land. Those are his Martians going out on patrol."

"It don't seem right," said Bates. "Here we offer you guys three million dollars worth of machinery to make water with. At-mos-pheeric condensers. You guys need water and admit it, but when we go shipping the condensers your Prince of Mars won't let the space ships land. So our poor guys hafta go traveling around out there losing their fuel and pretty soon they're gonna die."

"Serves 'em right," said Onsko. "They never asked the right people for permission to land."

"Huh?"

"LOOK, boy," said Onsko. He made a dot in the sand of the sparsely-grown lawn of the Martian park. "This here's the Prince of Mars. He wears good clothes and goes to meetings and makes speeches and

gives social flings, see, and he works eighteen hours a day and makes forty-two fifty sicks a month. In Earth money that means forty-two dollars and fifty cents. In other words, he's worthless, see? He's just a jerk, so we give him that job."

Onsko made another dot. "Over him we got the Prime Minister, see? He has to wear nice clothes and go to all the functions but he doesn't have to attend the operas or art galleries, see. So he's a step higher and he gets fifty sicks or dollars a month."

"Now when we get down to the Prince of Mars' butler, see, you've got a pretty important man. He don't have to wear so many clothes or be nice to many people, and he don't go to no functions at all. All he has to do is open the door of the palace for the Prince of Mars. Now this guy, he makes policy. He's got a lot of time for thinking what the government should do right or wrong, so we pay him five hundred dollars a month, and if he has lots of brains someday he gets promoted to janitor of the palace, where he gets seven hundred and fifty dollars a month and don't wear no fancy clothes and he can go ahead and say 'ain't' if he wants because he's not putting on front."

"A great system," grinned Bates. "Wish I had more of that fire-water."

"If a man lives long enough," sighed Onsko peacefully, "he gets to my position. I don't do no work, and I talk like I please and I sleep on a park bench. I do lots of thinking for the government and they pay me one hundred and fifty thousand sicks a month, and I can have anything I want on the planet."

"You're a bum," said Bates.

"Right, boy. And it took me a long time to reach it. So when your Earth Ambassador, that guy Thorne, he comes here and asks the Prince of Mars, who makes forty-two fifty a month, can he land the space ship with the water equipment, he's wasting his time. He's a jerk. He shoulda asked me because the Prince wouldn't dare give him a decision in his unimportant job."

"Mean they can land those Earth ships if you say so?"

"Right."

Bates stood up uncertainly. "All right, boy, lemme tell you something. I been

showing you my uniform and telling you how I was a Night Guardian over in the Ambassador's building, but that ain't all the truth. I'm also a janitor. So that makes me on your level. Now I ask you, lemme land those Earth ships, boy."

"Boy," said Onsko, "you work for wages and you gotta wear special clothes and you make fifty-five a week. You ain't on my level. Your Ambassador, he makes fifty thousand a year, and him I'll talk to. Tell him I'll be on my park bench if he wants to see me."

And Onsko rose with bony dignity and hobbled over to his favorite bench and stretched out in serenity.

"Boy," said Bates to himself, "that boy and me sure did have one too many. I better go report for work."

THE Earth mission building was a beehive of activity. Frightened clerks scurried in and out of the conference room. Automatic typewriters pounded. In the signal room the tele-flash to Earth was hot from hours of usage. Bates heard the rumble of angry voices behind the conference room doors as he went to his locker and slipped out of his soiled uniform.

He felt pretty good. Those dumb Ambassadors dealing with the lousy Prince of Mars when he only got forty-two fifty a month! That was Thorne. And that Chadwick. Always complaining about the official liquor being stolen. Nobody cared about his darned official liquor. Not on Mars. And that stonehead, that General Nelson, with his white gloves, always running his gloves down the venetian blinds to find dirt. Some mission! No wonder those poor Earth guys out in space couldn't land their ships with these knuckleheads handling things.

Dressed in a clean uniform, Bates took his broom and went to the conference room door. Normally it would've been empty, but the Earth rocket had only enough fuel to last until midnight and so it was a big crisis.

Bates thrust open the door and walked in with confidence. Two dozen top mission people turned to stare at the interruption. But even the sight of Bates with his broom couldn't stop their business. They were watching the tele.

Out in space Captain Holmes of the

TRUST was broadcasting, his face set in agony.

"You've got to get me in. My men are going crazy. The PILGRIM ran out of fuel—tried to land. The Martians—they shot it down. We're all going to die if you don't get us permission to land. For God's sake, do something!"

The long, stern face of J. Richards Thorne, Martian Ambassador, was etched with deep lines of care. "We're doing everything possible, Captain. I am in touch with the Prince of Mars hourly. The Prime Minister. The Military. The Martians agreed that the equipment you carry is needed on Mars. In his memo of March 25th the Prince agreed that the shipment was a good idea. There is only some slight objection to our shipping without permission. But we will get that permission if it's humanly possible to get it."

There was an odd, ugly sound out on the space ship and Captain Holmes looked fearfully over his shoulder. "God help us," he said bitterly, "because you obviously can't."

The screen blanked.

"If I had men and ships," cried General Nelson, slapping the table, "I'd blow the Prince of Mars to hell!"

"Washington is going crazy," said Chadwick, the Martian Consul. "Congress is tearing up their seats. Gentlemen, if we don't get those ships permission to land and they all die we will be summarily executed when we get back to Earth."

"We're trying!" cried Thorne. "My God, every one of us has tried every angle possible. We're in touch with every important Martian. But all the Prince of Mars does is complain that we sent the ships out here without proper permission and write memos saying that the basic idea is good, and make little speeches to me—"

"And he wears stiff clothes and only makes forty-two fifty a month," interrupted Bates, leaning on his broom, hand on his hips. "You asked the wrong guy, Chief. You should've asked Onsko."

There was a silence. Every eye in the room turned on him. Frosty stares rolled over him.

"Who," said Thorne coldly, "is Onsko?"

"Fellow that lives in the park," said Bates. "He don't wear no expensive clothes,"

or go to no operas or speak nice to the ladies at teas. He don't make no speeches. He just runs Mars."

"You're drunk!" said Chadwick.

General Nelson chittered and stammered his rage at the impertinent interruption. "J-j-janitor!" he spluttered.

"It all works in reverse here," said Bates, smiling. "Guys that have the big positions and clothes and stuff, they're all front. The butlers, they're important, and the janitors. Onsko's most important of all; he's just a bum."

"He's gone mad," squeaked Miss Forshaw, the Administrative Assistant.

Thorne rolled his eyes heavenward to witness his persecution. "Do something, somebody. Get him out of here!"

"Drinking while those poor boys are dying out there," flashed Chadwick, "You ought to be sent to prison."

General Nelson quirked his fingers at two muscular aides.

"I want this man sobered up the hard way and thrown out of the building," he roared. "I mean the hard way."

There was a flash of movement and Bates felt himself leave the floor.

"You gotta see Onsko!" he yelled at the Ambassador.

But it was too late. The Ambassador was learning from the doomed space ships that they no longer had enough fuel to reach the safety of the Martian moons. And now the President was calling him. . . .

BATES limped back to the park bench. He felt bruised all over. He *was* bruised all over.

"They don't believe me, Onsko," he said. "I couldn't get the Ambassador to come. Can't you just give me a piece of writing or something?"

"Huh-uh," said Onsko not even opening his eyes.

"If all this junk is true," said Bates, "how come your Prince don't tell my Ambassador to see you?"

Onsko opened one eye and stared pityingly at Bates. "Cause he's a front man, stupid. And a front man don't ever tell nobody nothing, see? It's his job to pretend he's important."

Bates kicked Onsko.

Onsko sat up in surprise. He rubbed his hip. "Boy, what did you do that for?"

"You're lying, boy. You're only a bum and you can't help our poor guys, and I'm sore cause they gotta die. Besides I hate liars."

"Boy, I ain't lying."

"Prove it."

Onsko laughed. "Go," he said, "ask the Prince yourself."

Bates climbed up the ornate steps of the palace.

Frozen-faced guards lined those steps, stared at him with open hostility. He felt his knees weaken at those stares; he had been cringing before authority all his life. At the top of the steps a big officer barred his way.

"What do you want?"

"I want," quavered Bates, "to see the Prince."

The officer gave him a withering look. "Speak louder, please."

"The Prince!" yelled Bates, and then trembled at the sound of his voice.

"Who are you?"

"I'm an official of the United States Government!" cried Bates.

The officer sneered.

"No," he said, "I'm a janitor. I—"

"Well, which is it?"

The uniforms seemed to close in on him.

"Janitor," he croaked.

The officer passed him in.

The massive doors were opened by a butler. The butler's look was frosty; his eyes pierced Bates. Bates cleared his throat and asked for the Prince. The butler stared at his uniform doubtfully.

"What for?"

"About some poor guys dying in space, that's what for!"

The butler shook his head. "Your Ambassador just came in. He's with the Prince now."

"But I'm a janitor!" cried Bates.

The portly butler grunted. "Boy, why didn't you say so?" he said. He stepped back and Bates followed him in.

"So you make five hundred a month," said Bates gaining some courage. "Some job. Some layout!" He licked his lips and studied the great marble staircases, deep blue rugs, flesh-nude statues of siren women.

The butler didn't answer but padded off down the hall.

THE four men sat around a table. The Prince, his dignified, youthful head bent politely to listen to Thorne, seemed all the more evil for his obvious respect for the Earthmen. General Nelson squirmed, wanting to snatch up a gun and blast this young fool.

Chadwick diddled with his watch chain. He was obviously curbing the hot speeches on his tongue.

"There's an hour left to our ships," said Thorne. "After that, no fuel. They must have permission to land. They will land anyway."

"If they land without permission I'm afraid I'll have to shoot them down," said the Prince. "I'm sorry that we cannot get together, but you did not get a duly-authorized form for the shipment."

"Give me a duly-authorized form now!" cried Thorne, slamming the table with his fist. "My God, man, you may be leading your planet to war. Down on earth they're going crazy. They'll demand revenge."

A butler coalesced out of nowhere. "A Mr. Bates to see you," he told the Prince. "On the space ship matter."

Thorne, Chadwick and Nelson sat bolt upright.

"Who is he?" asked the Prince.

"A janitor." The butler looked down his nose at the three Earthmen and made a slight motion of his head to the Prince.

"I'm afraid you'll have to excuse me," said the Prince, hastily rising.

"That madman—"

"That drunk!"

"Why Bates is my own janitor! How can you possibly allow him in your palace?"

The butler moved around to the Ambassador, placing the bulge of his stomach firmly against the man.

"The Prince desires you to leave," he said coldly.

"Never!" cried Nelson. "Bring that soandso in here. We'll—"

"Excuse me," said Pismo Bates entering the room. His expression was a mixture of fear and doggedness. "I've just come from Onsko. He said you have the lowest paying, miserable job on Mars, Prince. He said that

you make forty-two fifty a week. He said you couldn't make no decisions—"

He got that far and three Earthmen descended on him. They carried him kicking and screaming to the door.

"Onsko says save those poor boys!" he yelled. "Onsko—"

"You're fired!" roared Thorne.

They thrust him out, flying, and he slapped into something soft outside and he heard the door slam. He was in a heap about somebody's legs, and he'd done his best and he couldn't save the space ships. Also he didn't even have a job anymore. He decided just to stay on the floor.

"Boy," said Onsko, peering down at him, "what are you doing on that cold, stone floor?"

"I got flung here by my Ambassador, that's what," said Bates. He got up painfully. "It'll be a long equinox before I pay my taxes to a government that hires Ambassadors like that," he said. "What are you doing here, boy?"

"I come to see about this mess," said Onsko. "After all, I want that water equipment on my planet, and I don't want no forty-two fifty a week Prince lousing me up."

"You tell him, boy," said Bates. "I feel overdone."

Onsko pounded on the door. It was a peculiar, authoritative knock. Onsko stood there whistling between his dirty, yellow teeth and suddenly the door was thrust open. The Prince and the butler stood there.

"Well, men," said Onsko, "how does it go?"

Simultaneously, fear and respect flashing in their eyes, the Prince and the butler bent to the floor. Onsko stepped into the room carefully planting his grimy feet on the back of the Prince and the butler.

"Ambassador," he said to Thorne, "you sure do make a fuss the way you run your business."

Bates, peering over Onsko's shoulder, could never forget the look of horror and disillusion on the faces of Thorne, Chadwick and Nelson.

"Who—are you?" stammered Thorne.

"Onsko," said Onsko, "and this here's my buddy, Pismo Bates, janitor."

"They fired me," said Bates.

"Congrats on the promotion," said Onsko.

He turned to the Ambassador. The three Earthmen had collapsed in chairs.

"You—run the planet?" asked Thorne weakly. Onsko nodded.

Chadwick put his handkerchief to his nose as Onsko advanced and slumped into a fancy chair of the Prince. The butler got up and brought a silver decanter to Onsko. The Prince lit a cigar and handed it to Onsko.

"Mostly," said Onsko. "You should never judge other civilizations by your own, boy." He plopped the decanter amidst his dirty rags and said, "Want to see?"

"Show us how you do it, boy," said Bates at his shoulder.

Onsko snapped his fingers. The Prince jumped to the tele. "Prime Minister," said Onsko, "Military Marshall, Secretary of the Planet—"

Faces of the dignitaries flashed onto the screen almost at once.

"Bring in those ships," said Onsko. He took a drink. "I want a welcome mat, see? I want a big celebration with singing and dancing and yelling in the streets. I want a holiday written up and proclaimed. Blow the sirens, you jerks. Get off your fat behinds and do your job. Snap it."

The faces faded. Almost at once the sirens began to blow.

"Noisy, ain't it," grinned Onsko. "Sit down, boy," he told General Nelson who half rose in bewilderment. Then to the Prince "Get me those ships."

A gradual hubbub began to sound outside.

Great silver searchlights sprang to life. There was the distant hint of music. The

face of the distraught Captain Holmes appeared on the screen.

"Tell him, boy," said Onsko to the Ambassador.

"You can come in now, Captain," said Ambassador Thorne weakly.

A half-hour later Captain Holmes walked into the Prince's drawing room. Ambassador Thorne and his staff stood nervously by. Onsko and Bates sat in the two principal chairs lifting decanters to each other. Outside all of Mars was going crazy in a lather of a big celebration—the works, with horns and shouting and siren-women dancing in the streets—

"Thank God, you've saved our lives!" cried Holmes to the Ambassador.

"Quite so," said the Ambassador. He was pale. "And lost my job, I fear."

Holmes stared at Onsko and Bates who were obviously fairly well gone and being attended by the Prince of Mars, the butler and General Nelson.

"Boy," said Bates, "you and me, we're gonna get along great."

"Ain't it the truth," said Onsko. "Mars don't do business with anybody except you, boy. Any of your people want anything, it has to come from good old Pismo Bates, far as I'm concerned."

"I'm your boy, boy," said Bates, winking familiarly at General Nelson.

"As long as you can handle that green stuff like that," said Onsko, "you've got no worries."

"I always wanted a job like this," said Pismo Bates, staring down into the depths of the green stuff.

THE RECLUSE

By MIKE CURRY

*The human voice! Had there even been so sweet
a sound? Arak Miller ached for it—
too eagerly; too swiftly.*

TWENTY-FIVE years later a ship appeared, on an afternoon in the planet's summer.

Arak Miller watched it from the mesa. *From Earth, he thought. From Earth!*

But Arak Miller was an ordered man. Even now, in the face of resurging visions of his wife, and his sons, and his work, and the mighty civilization from which he had been cut adrift, his thoughts were ordered: probably the ship had arrived from Earth to resurvey one of the Class II uninhabitable planets of the Alpha Centaurus System. Tomorrow its scout ships would whip along the day sides at five thousand feet. Tomorrow atop the mesa he must light his pyres, some hundred-odd gigantic piles of pine trees and brush that would burn with billowing smoke. He must signal the presence of a lone Earthman.

With a hypnotic intensity he stood watching the ship until, toward evening, it merged into the gray sky over the horizon. Then he ran across the clearing and down to his house by the river that wound through the valley a thousand feet below. "Come on, you fool!" he shouted to Marbach, sitting beneath a tree. Arak Miller threw the figure over his shoulder and carried him to the house. He sat Marbach on a chair and went into the kitchen to eat.

Arak Miller had been nomadic the first few years after he crashed and had been abandoned for dead, until he found in the planet's narrow temperate zone one of the few arable regions capable of sustaining him. There was sufficient small game, the river was cool, and because the rain fell mainly in the valley, his pyres were safe.

In recent years he was always building. He had added a front porch to the cabin he had started with, then more rooms which he

had never used, then an attic into which he never went. Now it was a house. It had chairs and tables, a bed, a rug of vines, a garden for vegetables and tobacco, and a garden for flowers.

He ate a leisurely meal of potatoes and corn and meat of the rabbit-like creatures which he trapped. Miss Gormeley was sitting on the porch as he went out. "A ship's come," he shouted. "I may be saved, you understand?"

He recalled he had intended to do something about Miss Gormeley's nostril. With one of his knives he scraped a little against the wall of her left nostril. Then he stood back, satisfied. "Now you look better," he said. With a wry grin he added, "You can smell better, too."

FOR a long time he could not sleep, remembering that he had been cut off in the prime of his life. He had been the Senior Astrophysicist in the Systems War Office on Earth, working on the Second Einstein Modifications that promised travel to the more distant galactic Systems. He had completed six months of comparison spectrography in the barren Centaurus System and had been about to take the year's return journey to Earth, looking forward to a vacation trip with his family to Venus City. He had been in the forefront of the free world's pushing back of the last frontiers of man.

He twisted on his bed in a wild agony of hope and yearning. "Someday soon," he shouted to the walls, "I'll ride the monorail across the Western plains." He had discovered that it helped, to talk aloud, though none of his devices could make him forget he was a prisoner. To feel the Centaurus skies closing down on him and the alien mountains crushing him, so far from his

work and those he loved, was to feel a terrible suffocation from which there was no release.

But then he would go doggedly to work, or else carve the life-size figures to keep him

silent company, and try to forget.

He talked on and on, and finally he could talk no more. He slept.

He was awakened by a pattering on the roof.



"Rain!" he shouted. He jumped up and ran to the window socket. The rain clouds were high, and heavy with storm.

It struck him like a blow: they hung above the mesa.

Above his pyres.

In a panic he clambered up to the mesa, forgetting his breakfast, forgetting his outer clothing, his mind in disorder.

The shock wave pounded his eardrums.

He was too startled to make words. With unbelieving eyes he saw, about five miles away where the river emptied into the sea, the black cloud of an atomic explosion rise into the sky to spread out under the rain.

Then suddenly he was running blindly through the rain. The scout must have come down. They must be testing. The area was ideal for testing atomic weapons. *I must reach them before they leave.*

Through heavy undergrowth he pushed his way down the slope to the valley. His foot slipped on an exposed root. With a sharp crack of bone, he fell.

"My ankle!" he screamed, with terror smashing at his mind. He managed to find two thick lengths of branch that would serve as crutches. Then he started hobbling awkwardly toward the river.

For an hour he forced himself on urgently along the river bank, now feeling knife-like pains slicing up through his body. The effort of moving was beginning to exhaust him.

He fell down, and rested a moment. He heard a tree crash in the forest ahead. He heard someone shout.

A human voice!

He began to sob, softly at first, then uncontrollably. A human voice! It had never been so sweet a sound.

HE CLIMBED painfully to his feet, crashed on through the undergrowth. The density of trees ended abruptly and he stopped. Around the scout ship in the clearing beyond, robot dredges were digging the foundations for buildings. Gray-uniformed men were setting up new-type atomic artillery at the perimeters.

Arak Miller drew a deep breath. "I'm saved," he said, his voice breaking. "I'm going to be a free man!" He tottered on the

edge of hysteria, but controlled himself with a mighty effort of will.

He took a step forward to reach the clearing. Then he stopped.

Something was wrong.

He tried to put together the pieces of his mind. Everything looked normal. Construction going on, stores being transferred to temporary warehouses, all the usual activities of a scout party on an atomic testing mission. The artillery was pointing—

That was the flaw.

The artillery faced inward.

He looked back at the construction work. "Not foundations for buildings," he said dully. "Ditches."

As he watched, a flag was run up on a pole. The dreams of Arak Miller crashed in his mind.

It was the flag of the slave world, superimposed upon the symbol of the Systems. The world controlled by the dictators, which for centuries had existed alongside the free world in a perpetual cold war. During some stage of Arak Miller's long imprisonment, from Venus to Centaurus the dictators had taken over.

Hidden from guards, he lay on the ground and watched for a long time. Only when the next batch of captives was taken out of the scout ship and lined up in front of the ditch, did he turn his gaze away.

He waited till the next shock wave had passed, then with tears streaming down his face, hobbled back in the rain toward the river. He crawled the last two miles to his house. Miss Gormeley was sitting where he had left her. "I am sorry," he said painfully. "I will have to destroy you. And Marbach. And our house, and the pyres. And when all that is done, I will have to leave this area. Otherwise they might find me."

Miss Gormeley stared blindly out at the river.

He lay still on the floor, gasping for breath. "You see," he explained, "I am not a prisoner. They are the prisoners. All of them. All the world—but me."

His eyes closed in exhaustion. "I like it here now," he said, almost in a whisper. "I intend to stay. There must be some place here where they can never find me, you understand?"

LIFE OF A SALESMAN

By FRED FREAIR

O'Brien's success story had no beginning; his creditors dotted the planets. Could Vivorum, the canny Martian, lift him out of his bankrupt hole with nothing more than a brush-off?

JOHN O'BRIEN stared moodily out of his office window in Prager, on Mars. Outside the ancient ritual was about to be performed, the heart-breaking ritual so common on Venture Row. He had seen it a thousand times but it never before had the meaning it had for him today.

An expensive, dignified aircar pulled up. Out of it got a Bankruptcy Official from the Court of Princely Creditors, an official robed in black and wearing the helmet of duty. Beside the official came a purple-robed officer from the Conservatory of Violence. "The cops, that is," muttered O'Brien to himself.

The black-robed official took out a heavy scroll of paper, kissed it, and sprinkled it with holy sand, according to the Martian Ritual. The document was handed to the policeman who saluted. Then the two figures stopped at the entrance. While the purple-robed policeman tap-tapped with his silver hammer to nail the document to the door, the black-robed Creditor Noble stood there with a piece of round, shining metal which looked like an angel's halo.

"Well, there's the quarantine and goose egg," said Boscan, John's man-of-all-work, coming into the office and dropping a single paper on his desk. "Here's a waybill, boss."

John grunted. Outside passersby were stopping to watch the ridiculous ceremony, and he could see the white, human faces of the other office inhabitants in the vicinity also staring from their windows.

"Never send to know for whom the bill is totaled," misquoted John, "the cash register rings 'No Sale' for you and me."

"You owe me a week's pay, don't forget," said Boscan quickly, his round, usually happy face serious.

Now the proclamation of John's bankruptcy was up and the officials were nailing the halo to his door. Only it wasn't a halo, but a zero, a visual, glittering warning to Earthmen and Martians alike that they entered the office of John O'Brien, Sales Representative, at their own risk, because his credit and money in the Princely Bank of Mars amounted to zero, goose egg, nuttin'.

"Tough," said Boscan. "You fought a good fight, though, boss."

John toyed with the single waybill on his desk. "I was an engineer," he said, "and flopped at that. I was a contractor and flopped at that. And now—"

Boscan had that grim, hard humor that Earthmen a long time on Mars always got. "Don't worry. As a Princely Prisoner-Bankrupt, you'll succeed. These Martian prisons aren't so bad. I mean, they'll give you a trade you can work at the rest of your life."

John tried to swallow and couldn't. "They're right, I guess. Failure at home is too easy. Still, ten years in prison for failing seems a little stiff. . . ."

The officials came into his office. The girl was a third generation Martian and had a creamy white face and level eyes, with the serene look of the Martian nobility. Self-assurance and success glowed from her.

"I am the Lady Roc," she said, "your principal creditor. Please accommodate yourself for the journey to the prison colony in three days' time, John O'Brien."

There was a pleasant, foreign twist to her English; the red lips hesitated a bit at the words.

"How much do I have to pay to avoid prison?" he asked.

"Ten thousand. But it is silly to talk because now no man on Venture Row will find you happy to do business with."

"And don't try to leave Pragor," said the police official. "For every day you are missing, we add a year to your sentence."

"I think we will have your passport now," said the girl, holding out her hand.

John flushed. "Now, wait. I've got three days. Until then I'm entitled to my passport. Only the most untrustworthy of the traders get their passports taken up."



"There depart many space ships each day," said the girl in a pleasant murmur. "We of the Creditors' make sure, you see. In the slang of your planet, you are a tiny potato, John O'Brien."

Boscan snorted. John felt a flush creep up his face.

"Listen, Miss Icecube," he cried, "I don't have to take insults from you. Not for three days." She shrugged, smiling, and it was her lovely, patrician smile that he couldn't stand. He really flipped his lid against her hollow-cheeked beauty. He thrust his face at her, shouting about the unfairness of it, of being sent to jail for debts, an evil long ago abolished on Earth.

"You have also on Earth confusion," she answered calmly. "There you worship success, but you do not make penalties for failure. Thus even people who fail sometimes delude self with the idea they are a success. Thus everything is front, and whether you can drive a Cadillac aircar and live inside a big house, not whether you are really a solvent person. My dear fellow, you are terribly not solvent!"

Suddenly the policeman slipped behind him and caught his arms. "May I be excused for this?" he inquired mildly as he exerted an iron grip on John. The girl stepped forward and plucked John's passport from his pocket.

"Now you will not suddenly be leaving for elsewhere, is that not so?"

Furious, John jerked loose and aimed a blow at the policeman. The policeman sidestepped, grinning.

"Truly, I find this work exciting," he said.

John subsided in a mixture of emotions; their courtesy and assurance was so darned untouchable.

He remembered the waybill. He caught it up. "Look!" he cried, "I still have one supplier left. I still have goods coming in that I can sell. I still have a chance."

Lady Roc looked surprised. She brought a clipboard out of her robe and leafed through some papers. "We had notice of no further shipments by all the firms you represent. What is this one supplier who treats you like a son?"

John ripped open the envelope with anxious fingers. "Jarvison Earthworks," he said,

recognizing an old friend that he had gone to school with years ago. He remembered writing to Goofy Jarvison some time ago asking him if he had any line that John could push on Mars. "And he's sent me five thousand—"

John, thunderstruck, stared at his notice of delivery. The girl reached over and plucked it from his fingers.

"So they have sent you five thousand tons of sand," she said. "Colored sand. For Mars, the silicon planet, they send you colored sand." She turned to the policeman and smiled. It was the first time John had ever seen one of these nobles smile. She had dazzling teeth, at that.

"Now I think we depart for three days," she told the policeman.

"It is desirable."

She turned at the door, looking very human with amusement in her eyes.

"I am grateful for the knowing of you, John O'Brien," she said. "What with your hitting the policeman, and shouting in my face, and the colored sand, I have, as your planet says, observed everything the volume!"

IT WAS a rugged three days. With the nailing of the Martian proclamation on his door, John found that his troubles had really started. Word traveled ahead of him wherever he went. The two or three small glass factories laughed in his face at the idea of buying his sand. The US Consul was no more sympathetic.

"You can't blame the Martians," he said. "Every person who ever missed making a million on Earth heads for Mars. Long ago the Martians made it pretty tough in self-protection—either it was controlling trade or being plagued to death with salesmen of useless gadgets; not to mention the upkeep and finding jobs for those who went broke and would starve. Your signed visa already obligates you to follow their laws."

"But it's no crime to go broke!" cried John.

"And you won't go to a criminal prison," said the consul. "It really isn't bad. You'll earn enough just to pay off—no more. It's just tough enough to make you want to pay off your debts and get out of Mars forever."

There was no chance of getting a loan on Mars. And his family back home was distressed, but two or three thousand would be all they could spare him.

He spent the last night roaming Venture Row. His small apartment had been denied him as soon as the landlord heard about his bankruptcy. His office had been locked on him; his warehouse was locked, and he had twenty-four Martian dollars left.

On that last night he considered getting drunk and forgetting his troubles as he wandered into a Martian park. There was a sparse grass and a few trees and the double Martian moons shone down to make it an ethereal and sad place to be. There were other people in the park—not couples, for the Martians had different love customs, and not down-and-outers because the rigid laws prevented the failures in society from running around loose.

John no sooner sat down dejectedly on a park bench than a Martian seemed to pop up from the bushes. He was a wizened old man with a one-toothed grin. He was dressed poorly, but his eyes blazed in burning eagerness.

"I have the concession of that bench, sir," wheezed the old man. "To sit here costs you a dollar."

Marveling at the commercialness of the Martians, John threw him a dollar. It didn't matter much now. The old man stuffed the dollar in his rags and sat down.

"I will be glad to listen to your troubles for a dollar," he said. "That is what the park is for, you know. The Place of Troubles. Martians come to the parks to think about troubles. But there're good and bad listeners. Some listeners only pretend to listen, while others like Vivorum, that's me, really listen and also give advice for a small, extra fee."

John couldn't help laughing at that. He tossed off another dollar. At least here was someone interested in doing business.

"You're very intelligent," said Vivorum. "Most Earth people think they know it all. They get insulted when I make my offer. But the Earth people really don't know Mars, its laws and customs. I may be able to save you thousands of dollars. Go ahead."

John outlined his situation bitterly, telling

of his various failures. The old man listened carefully, occasionally scratching his long shanks.

"Naturally you fail," he said, "because you are only interested in money. You care nothing for the products you sell; you care nothing for the people you sell to. Your family on Earth has made you success-conscious, and the only kind of success is money success. I tell you this free, because it is not advice, only comment, and you know this already."

"It doesn't save me from prison."

"Give me another dollar," said Vivorum. "I may be able to sell you some useful advice."

John paid over another dollar, intrigued by the brass of this old character.

Vivorum crossed his legs under him and closed his eyes. "I may have to think very hard on this," he said. "If I do, it will cost double, but I shall let you know. Now what did you like to do as a child? We must go back to that."

John thought very hard. "I liked to tell stories."

"I mean what did you work at?"

"Way back? Why, I had a newspaper route. And I cut the grass and shined my father's shoes and washed the car and took care of the furnace."

"You must invent an occupation out of this thing," said Vivorum. "For the truth is, they cannot put you in prison if you have an occupation that pays. Most of these Earth people are not willing to be anything but big jobbers on Venture Row, and so they fail and go to prison."

"Well—"

"Therefore," persisted Vivorum, "I will sell you an open option on my park bench for fifteen dollars. Then you can convince the Princely Court that you have an occupation and will pay your debts."

"It doesn't look like it brings in much income."

"That is where your brain comes in," said Vivorum. "Do not worry about discommoding me, for I have other bench concessions in the park."

John handed over fifteen dollars. He was beginning to get an idea. A silly, kind of goofy one. But at least he wouldn't be any worse off. . . .

"For another dollar," said Vivorum, "I will gladly listen to the story of your life—"

"No," said John. "Go on, now, beat it. I've got work to do."

THE crude signs covered the park bench under the hot sun. One said: SHOE-SHINE ONE DOLLAR. Another: GET YOUR CARTON OF LUCKY EARTH SAND. A DOLLAR, NO TAX. ASK ABOUT OUR SPECIAL OFFER—YOU ARE HERO OF STORY TOLD WHILE SHINING SHOES. WE BRUSH YOUR CLOTHES OFF—SPECIAL TODAY FOR ONLY ONE DOLLAR.

There was a crowd of curious Martians around the bench. The girl in the black robe and the police official came up to the crowd and listened.

"It sure feels good," said one Martian. "I mean, it's ridiculous, putting polish on shoes on a dusty world like Mars, a strange Earth idea, but it sure makes your feet feel good from the rubbing."

Another held up a tiny package of colored sand. "I came to the park full of my troubles with my wife. But this lucky Earth sand really gets me. He says all you have to do is sprinkle it on the trouble source and it'll change your luck."

"How do you know it'll work?" asked another.

"It must work. He offers double your money back if it doesn't. Nobody in his right mind would offer more for something than it was worth if it didn't work."

"Get him to tell you a story," said another. "I came here feeling as low as a Martian cat. When he started to shine my shoes he asked me my name. Then while he worked he told me a story about how I went out from the park and made a lot of money and married a pretty girl and got to be a Noble in the Princely Bank. It's all untrue, of course, but it sure helps to hear somebody tell you how good you are."

The girl and the policeman pushed their way to John O'Brien's shoeshine stand.

"This you describe as a legitimate business?" she asked incredulously.

John, sweating away, gestured at the cigar box next to him which was crammed with Martian dollar bills.

"Fifty bucks in four hours," he said. "You'll get your ten thousand back a lot sooner than ten years if you let me stay out of jail."

The girl turned to the Martian official. He shrugged.

"You are the creditor, Lady Roc," he said. "It's up to you."

The girl slipped down on the bench just vacated.

"I will judge this matter. Give me the shine, please."

She lifted her robes and grinned in lofty triumph down at John as she placed her feet on the pedestals. Her feet were bare except for thin sandal-soles fitted entirely under her foot.

"Perhaps you polish the skin," she said jeeringly. "Perhaps you do not have a good idea but only try to swindle me with the shine. Only older Martian men wear real feet-shoes."

John looked at her grimly. Without hesitation he whipped out a small red bottle. It had a tiny brush on the end of it. He put a dab of red substance on each of her dainty toe-nails. He spread it around the nail and fanned the feet with his rag to make it dry. Her face fell.

"That is most unthought of," she murmured. But already he was polishing the red toenails with his rag and she arched her feet in pleasure, suppressing an obvious giggle at the sensation.

"Uuuuuuuu," she said. "Oooooooooh!"

But John was already telling her a story, a story in which the Lady Roc advanced in her trade from a simple noble creditor to an Earlsip, and then a Countesship and finally a Baronetcy. And all of this time, men worshipped her beauty and her personality.

They went mad for the love of her and sometimes cast themselves out of windows of high buildings because she was so cold and didn't return their love. She blushed at this, but when he stopped she arched her trim feet and cried:

"This is great news to me! Let me conquer the Prince of Mars also!"

He described how she married the Prince of Mars. Then he made her get up.

"That's for two dollars and now I give you the brush-off," he said. He threw back

her robe and began brushing off her Martian gown with his whisk broom.

"That tickles," she said. "I would prefer the hands for the brushing."

That time he blushed, but he brushed her off with his hands. She closed her eyes and murmured: "Ah, you are very commercial, John O'Brien!"

"It is strange that he brushes you off," said the policeman who had watched the performance with awe. "I have never seen you let a man touch your body before, due to your nobility."

"It must be commercially done," she said, paying her money to John. "Commercially done, it is fitting and proper for an official like myself to be touched."

John forced a bag of lucky sand in her hand. "Scatter it for luck," he said, "that

costs another dollar."

She paid off, her eyes shining. "Possibly the nail-shine will crack off by tomorrow," she said.

"It will," said John.

"Possibly I shall use up all my lucky sand and forget my hero story," she said.

"You will," he said.

"Perhaps I shall wear different clothes tomorrow and need the brush-off," she murmured.

"It's always a pleasure—at the standard price, of course," grinned John.

Their eyes met full and square, each blushing and the Martian official scratched his head in wonder as the Lady Roc led him off, swinging her legs in a girlish manner to show the red toe-nails and singing to herself in a very unladylike fashion.

STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 30, United States Code, Section 223) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION OF PLANET STORIES published quarterly at Stamford, Connecticut for October 1, 1954.

1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are:

Publisher, Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc., 1658 Summer St., Stamford, Conn.
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Business manager, T. T. Scott, 1658 Summer St., Stamford, Conn.

2. The owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a partnership or other unincorporated firm, its name and address, as well as that of each individual member, must be given.)

Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc., 1658 Summer St., Stamford, Conn.
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5. The average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the 12 months preceding the date shown above was: (This information is required from daily, weekly, semiweekly, and triweekly newspapers only.)

MALCOLM REISS,
Managing Editor.

[SEAL]

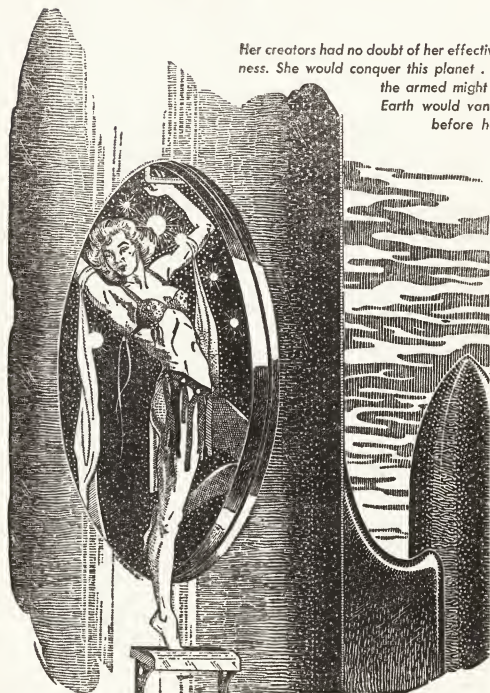
Sworn to and subscribed before me this 8th day of October, 1954.

RUSSELL E. NORTROP,
Notary Public.
(My commission expires April 1, 1955.)

THE ULTIMATE EVE

By H. SANFORD EFFRON

*Her creators had no doubt of her effectiveness. She would conquer this planet . . .
the armed might of
Earth would vanish
before her.*



THE sun had not yet taken the chill out of the early April morning that broke on the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, when the ship settled to the ground. It was surprisingly large compared to the aircraft native to this planet, and yet ridiculously small to have brought enough men and material to launch an invasion across light years of space.

The landing went unobserved in this fearful year of 1955. The world faced too many crucial crises of their own making to consider the necessity to be watchful for an extra-terrestrial invasion.

Hardly had the craft come to rest, when the outer lock slid noiselessly open and a small ladder-like stairway came down until it too had touched earth.

A man appeared in the doorway, pausing to study the landscape which lay before him. His features, his body, were human. Despite his being too well muscled, and his face unusually handsome, he would never have aroused suspicion of being from another planet.

Grunting in satisfaction, he permitted himself the pleasure of being proud at having landed so near the cabin chosen as his goal. It had been a wise choice, this picking of so well isolated a place as a testing ground for the weapon. A wisp of smoke, a dark smudge against the rich blueness of the sky, attested to the cabin's occupancy. What he was about to do seemed fitting, for even the scientists of this planet had used animal life to test their own puny weapons. Now he, man, would be the guinea pig to prove the devastation to be wrought against all mankind native to this world.

He turned and spoke to someone within the lock. His language, while resembling no earthly tongue, was not much different than perhaps English to Chinese. It was foreign but not completely alien.

With the ease of a man accustomed to heavier gravity he went down the ladder easily, turning when he reached the ground to look up at the lock.

And then to the edge of the air lock, she came—the weapon! There had been no doubt in the minds of her creators as to her effectiveness—she would conquer this planet. The armed might of Earth would

vanish before her. Before the year had ended the invasion would have been accomplished. As a weapon, the Earth's H-Bomb might well be a mere firecracker. She had been tested against the men of her own planet and found to be irresistible, but now would come the final test against the enemy without laboratory-controlled conditions.

The planet she had come from is unimportant, suffice to say their technology had conquered space over a thousand years ago. For over half that time they had subjugated neighboring worlds until their rule had spread to the borders of Earth. Scouting ships had been spying on Earth for the past two centuries and had brought back alarming reports concerning the rapidly expanding technology of this planet.

Soon after the aliens had discovered the secret of space flight had come the added knowledge planets could be conquered by other than the force of arms. Psychological warfare had been developed to a fantastic degree, making weapons more potent than any bombs of fissionable material.

There she stood, a monument to her creators. Eve, soon to be conqueror of the planet Earth.

To attempt description of her beauty would be an impossibility, for the languages of man do not contain the necessary word-symbols to express the utter perfection of her face and form. To each man she would appear different, for he would see in her the substance of his unconscious desires for the woman he had never dreamed might exist. For this purpose the scientists had labored in their laboratories for nearly a half century, and now she would justify the time and effort spent in her creation.

Gently, she smiled at the man waiting below, and despite the special conditioning he had undergone, and the drugs he took with careful regularity for added protection, he almost surrendered to the impulse to throw himself at her feet; to beg for only the privilege to serve her, to obey her, and to worship her.

Out of the entire space fleet, he, Commander Ydnas, after extensive psychological testing, had been selected for this task. The three months of conditioning had passed rapidly, his response to the treatments had been better than they had dared

to hope. In the two weeks of their flight he had been unaffected by her presence, and now upon landing he was beginning to feel the strain he was under. He wondered what would have happened had it not been for the added help of the drugs?

HIS face betrayed none of the anxiety he now felt. It was an impassive mask, his body was ramrod tense and erect.

She came down the steps gracefully, her liteness would have made the movements of a cat seem awkward and clumsy.

Both had been thoroughly trained in the languages needed to carry out the plan of invasion, English and Russian. First, the large continent of North America would be disarmed at her command; and then they would move across the large body of water to Europe. Russia would be their initial target there. The invasion timetable called for a three month campaign, and then Eve would be removed from the planet before the occupation fleet from the mother world would land. Not a man would be lost, nor a space ship damaged, and yet the planet's rich potential would be theirs for the taking.

And what of Eve? She was too dangerous to be permitted to return to her creators. Commander Ydnas had his instructions covering the final phase of the invasion plan. When her task of disarming Earth was completed, and the planet lay helpless to defend itself, they would blast off into space together. Soon as Earth's atmosphere was left behind, she would be slain, her body incinerated through the rocket tubes.

It seemed such a dreadful waste to destroy such beauty of perfection, but the Commander, raised from infancy to be a space officer, realized the need for her disposal. After the need for a weapon has passed, it is safer to destroy it than risk the danger of trying to store it. Even on this world they dumped their poison gases into the seas and did the same with the more volatile explosives.

"Come," he said, starting toward the cabin. When she would have taken his hand, he brushed it aside angrily. Even the work the psychologists had done to condition him, and the strength of the drugs, could be trusted only up to a point. He feared what her touch might do to the

iron discipline with which he kept himself in check.

The only response to his rebuff, was a shrug of those magnificently rounded shoulders, and a lazy half-smile of amusement.

Her creators had considered it a bit of ironic humor to name her so outlandish and yet befitting a name as Eve. For her namesake too had been a temptress bringing about the calamities of mankind, and now soon later another Eve would end the supremacy of man.

At the door of the cabin the commander paused. His eyes sought those of the woman. She stood regarding him strangely, and for the first time he found himself wondering what she must feel about her part in bringing about the defeat of a world? She had no control over her actions. She was conditioned to follow the tenets of the master plan. He wished he had not held himself so aloof from her the during the flight. Now there was no time to question what she felt. And after the invasion for her there would be only destruction.

Annoyed with himself, he turned back to the door, his knuckles sounded dully against the thickness of the wood. He waited impatiently, receiving no answer to his knocking. With one hand near the weapon in his belt, he reached out and lifted the latch.

Gesturing for Eve to remain outside, he stepped over the threshold.

A man dozed in the large chair before the still smouldering fireplace. When the cool air reached him he shivered and opened his eyes.

"I am Commander Ydnas."

The man gazed at him blankly, his sleep-stained face bewildered at the rude awakening. He seemed unimpressed by the military splendor of the commander's uniform.

The commander eyed the man with mild contempt. This would do as a guinea pig to prove the effectiveness of Eve. Here too would be an excellent base of operations. The man could supply many useful details needed before the invasion could begin.

"Eve," he called. "Come in!"

She entered the room reluctantly, her gaze pitying the man seated so strangely still in his chair. She waited for his expression to change when he saw her. In a moment he

would be grovelling at her feet, Eve hated what she was doing, but the patterns implanted in her brain by the creators made it impossible for her to resist.

The Commander's stern jaw relaxed, his mouth fell open in shock. Impossible! Incredible! The man continued to remain motionless, regarding them with annoyed perplexity.

The scientists had blundered; earth beings were not creatures governed by their emotions. The data collected by the spy ships had been erroneous, the invasion would fail.

INSTINCTIVELY he looked to the woman. Eve watched him in open amusement, and he wondered if he had not caught a glimpse of sympathy in her eyes. She knew what this meant to him. No man returned to the mother planet in defeat. If he did not follow the time-honored custom of self-destruction to atone for his failure, he would face a quick death when he returned.

"What—what did you want?" asked the man, annoyance making his voice a petulant whine.

"Nothing, sir. We made a mistake. I'm afraid we came to the wrong place."

The Commander turned to Eve, his face transformed by a smile for the first time since they had been together.

"I know of an asteroid that is pretty well out of the space lanes. It has an atmosphere and can support life without a great struggle on our part. Do you think you could like it there? Of course, it wouldn't be much of a world for you to conquer, and I would be the only man to serve you . . . but . . .

She studied him thoughtfully, and then in answer to what he had asked, she took

his arm. They left the cabin together, walking very closely.

It must have seemed a cosmic joke to the gods of the universe to see the invader and the woman, who was to have been his weapon, pause and wave a casual farewell to the planet they had come to conquer.

"Asteroid," the man mused aloud. "What kind of crazy gibberish had they been talking? Must be honeymooners from one of the nearby resorts."

He shrugged in an attempt to dismiss it from his mind, maybe he ought to ask Helen about it when she got back. Come to think of it she should be back with the supplies any minute now.

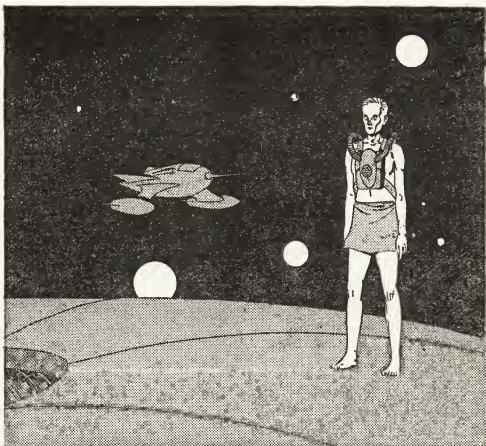
There was a strange roar from outside, and the sound of some great object hurtling through the air, but strangely enough the man did not leap from his chair and rush to the door to see what created the disturbance.

He did not move from the fireplace until the chill had begun to fill the cabin, and then reluctantly he stood up fumbling along the side of the chair for some object leaning against it.

When he located it, he grasped it tightly, and then made his way cautiously to the door. He shifted the stick to his left hand fumbling for the latch. Locating it he closed the door.

The invaders had come . . . and left in defeat. But the victor would never know he had beaten off the first invasion of Earth, saving mankind from slavery and civilization from destruction. To him they were mere voices babbling meaningless words. The splendor of their space ship, the wondrous fatal beauty of the woman never would be known to him . . . for he was totally blind!





THE VANISHER

By MICHAEL SHAARA

He was expendable, this Web Hilton, this young officer with the strange heritage. And so it was that he was ordered out into space where he saw the uncovered stars, and met the naked alien, and became the first man in history to die more than once.

THE two girls stayed to see the picture a second time and when they got out of the movie it was after midnight and raining and they couldn't get a cab. Louise bought a paper and put it over her head and ran off, laughing, in the direction of Albany Street. Ivy folded her kerchief and turned up Livingstone. She did not run. There was nothing wrong with rain, or with getting wet, and she enjoyed the coolness. She

plunged her hands deeply into her coat pockets and did not bother to walk quickly at all.

The night was very dark, made darker by the rain, which was heavy and full. But Ivy was unconcerned. She was a small-town girl, country bred, with three huge brothers who knew every man in the county. She had grown up with a strong belief in the natural goodness of things, of people, and although

she was young and slim and extremely pretty she had no worry now of walking home in the dark. This was her home town. She had lived here all her life. She passed by huge bushes and under the great clutching branches of trees without blinking at all of the things which could, and did, lurk behind them. She turned up Elmwood Road with her mind at rest, filled with skirts and dances and taffy pulls.

And her faith in people, as it turned out, was justified.

For the long arm that reached out of the bushes, the darkness, and plucked her with a rush into a deep black silence, was an arm of flesh, and an arm of bone, but it was very far from human.

The door opened at the top of the ramp and the colonel peered cautiously inside.

"Nobody here but us chickens," he said, sputtering in the rain, and the guard dropped the muzzle of the machine pistol and saluted.

The colonel stomped in onto the concrete floor, grumbling. He was followed by an enormous lieutenant, an immense, looming, cliff-shouldered man well over six feet tall. The lieutenant had to duck coming through the door, cast a downward salute to the startled guard. The colonel moved out from under the lieutenant's dripping overhang, pointed a lean wet finger down the hall.

"He here?"

"Yessir," said the guard, eying the monstrous lieutenant with respect.

The colonel wiped his face with a dry handkerchief, took off his hat and smoothed down his sparse white hair. Then he strode off down the concrete hall, motioning for the lieutenant to follow. Together they came to a bolted steel door. The colonel opened it without knocking, ushered the lieutenant inside.

The room they entered was wide and rich, oak-panelled, in great contrast to the white-washed concrete of the halls outside. In the center of the room was a mahogany desk, at which a small, sad, cigar-smoking man sat absorbedly drawing doughnuts on a white lined pad.

The colonel saluted. The man at the desk, whose name was Dundon, looked up at the big lieutenant and chomped on his cigar.

"Is *this* our man?"

"Yes sir. Lieutenant Hilton. He knows—"

"Sure is a big bugger," Dundon said, rising. The lieutenant regarded him calmly.

"He knows every phase of the operation, sir," the colonel said.

"Of course. Sit down, boy," Dundon said briefly, waving his cigar. The lieutenant sat. "What's a few extra pounds? May need 'em, by God." He put the cigar in his mouth and clamped his hands behind him, walked around to the front of the desk and sat down on the edge of it.

"When's take-off, sir?" the colonel asked.

Dundon looked at his watch. "Less than an hour. Does he know?"

The colonel whistled. "That soon? No, he doesn't know anything."

The lieutenant had taken off his hat, showing himself to be much younger and blonder than he had first appeared to Dundon. He sat watching both men without any particular expression.

"Well, we'd better get on with it," Dundon said, and reached out a hand toward the colonel, without looking at him. "Do you have the lieutenant's records?"

The colonel reached quickly into his inside coat pocket, drew out a long folded envelope which he laid in Dundon's hand. The small man hefted it, looked briefly inside.

"Hell," he said curtly. "Got to save time. If we have to brief him and get ready I can't go through all this. What's the story?"

Before the colonel could say anything Dundon looked at the lieutenant with a wide, amiable, thoroughly unexpected smile. "Don't mind us son, no time for manners. Have a cigar."

The lieutenant politely refused. The colonel took off his coat and began to dry himself out, talking as he moved.

"Well, as far as I can recall, here's the poop. His name is Augustus Webster Hilton, Second Lieutenant, RA, out of Fort Benning. He's six foot six and a half, weighs two hundred and forty some odd pounds. Age: 25. Nickname: Web. AGCT score of 145."

Dundon's eyes lifted.

"He's got a head on him," the colonel agreed. "Army record superior to excellent."

Present assignment instructing in orbits and trajectory at Base Training. Qualities of Organization, Leadership very high. Excellent officer material."

A slight fleeting frown crossed Dundon's face.

"Defects," the colonel said coolly. "Several minor, no major. Minor include a tendency to irk his superiors by failure to consult, by failure to keep his opinions to himself. Nothing unusual for the age, of course. Other defects are his size"—the lieutenant sat without moving through all of this—"and his blood type. He's got some rare kind of thing for which plasma is almost never available. That keeps him from front line duty."

The colonel stopped, began slowly to light a cigarette.

Dundon looked at him oddly.

"Nothing else?"

The colonel shook his head.

Dundon was suddenly flushed. "Wait a minute, son," he said to the lieutenant, and then he took the colonel by the arm and led him briskly into a corner.

"What the hell is this?" he hissed angrily, lowly, into the colonel's ear. "This boy looks like one hell of a good officer, what—"

The colonel held his finger to his lips, gestured cautiously.

"I couldn't tell you in front of him, chief."

"Couldn't tell me what? Listen, I'm not goin' to kill a young kid like—"

"It's Security. The major defect is Security."

Dundon quieted.

"What did he do?"

"Nothing he did, Chief, you won't like this. But it makes a big difference. You know the way Security is. They checked this boy all the way back to the cradle, found out things about him he doesn't know himself. His history checked all right, no trouble anywhere, except for his father. According to the records, he doesn't have any."

Dundon cocked an eyebrow. The lieutenant, unhearing, sat without looking at them.

"His mother claims to have married a man named Bruce Hilton in Chicago in 1930. There's no record of the marriage. Also, none of her friends ever met him. She went away from her home town—

Evanston—and stayed for a year and came back with a baby, a wedding ring, and a very sad tale of a husband who died. There's no record of the death of any Bruce Hilton. She made up the name obviously. Her maiden name Finnerty."

Dundon stared. "So what the hell—" he began, but the colonel cut him off.

So nobody knows. Just the boy's mother and Security. But Security has a special tab for cases like this. They figure like this: suppose the kid gets into a sensitive job, or gets to rank pretty high, and someone finds out about his, well, lack of parentage. You can't figure it. It could mean blackmail, it could mean security risk, or it could mean rumors among officers' wives, and a lot of nonsense like that. I know it doesn't sound like a thing you should hang a guy on, but, well, you know Security. They never take a chance. This kid will get to be a captain, maybe a major, maybe even an L. C. But he has no future in the army."

Dundon was looking down studiously at his shoes.

"So that's what you wanted," the colonel pursued, "somebody competent, but expendable. Right?"

Dundon looked up, his gray eyes filled with disgust. And then he realized that the colonel could not help it, did not like this either, and he patted him on the arm.

"Hell of a reason to kill a kid," he said softly, and turned back to the lieutenant, the man to be killed, who was sitting calmly in his chair and wondering when the brass was going to get to the point.

Dundon came back and sat down, and now with great kindness, told the lieutenant the story.

And so it was that Web Hilton went out into space, and saw the uncovered stars, and met the naked man, and became the first man in history to die more than once.

"YOU know of course," said Dundon, "that the satellite has been completed and is in orbit. The first crew went up on 9 September. Construction was finished on 20 September and the full crew was aboard within twelve hours. The whole thing went off without a hitch. There wasn't one thing we hadn't anticipated. We sent the green light to the president and sat back to wait

for the Russians to find out what was 'up.' " He grinned momentarily at his joke.

"The station was in orbit for a week," he went on, "and we were in constant radio contact. Furthermore, we had it under radar and telescopic observation, either one or the other or both, twenty-four hours a day, from points all over the Earth. Some of that I guess you know. The purpose is mainly to supplement the station's own radar. We don't want anything going near that station without our knowing about it real quick."

"And we know damn well," he said more slowly, his puzzlement beginning to show in his voice, "that nothing went near that station."

Web still waited, not following at all. Dundon sat on the edge of his desk, beginning to fidget now as he talked. His stubby fingers were running continually through his thin gray hair, and tightening his tie, and tugging at his buttons, and toying with the desk top. He had been under a great strain for a long time and it was obvious.

"On 28 September," he said evenly, "—now get this—on 28 September, in the middle of the afternoon, we lost radio contact with the station. It cut off in the middle of a weather observation, just like that. There were no background sounds at all, no noise or confusion. Just silence. We waited, figuring of course that they had blown a tube, or something, but we didn't hear a thing. After a few minutes we began to get worried. They didn't come in on the emergency radio either.

"Radar reported the satellite was still in the regular orbit. Nothing looked wrong, but we couldn't contact her. After a couple of hours we began to get panicky. We figured a small meteor had hit her. A big one would have knocked her out of orbit, but a small one might have penetrated through and knocked out both radios without altering trajectory to any noticeable extent. We figured that that must have been it, because by this time five hours had passed and we hadn't heard a word.

"So then we managed to get Visual, as soon as it got dark and the satellite orbited to position. We had a prearranged system of light signaling to be used in case both radios failed. In the telescopes we could even see the reflectors sitting right out on

the hub, completed untouched. But we waited all night and we never got a thing.

"Now dammit, it couldn't have been a meteor!" Dundon began to pace back and forth and both Web and the colonel followed him, absorbed.

"The station is shaped like a doughnut, with solid bulkheads all around. How could one meteor go all around the damn thing, kill everybody in it, knock out two separate radios, and still not disturb the orbit. It would take a swarm, obviously, even if you forget about the orbit, but there would have to be holes. And we had a close up view of that station, as close as the house across the street, and there wasn't a hole to be seen.

"Well, that night we sent up a rocket. Nothing big enough to show on radar had approached the station, or left it, so the only other solution was sabotage. One or more of the men we sent up had to be enemy agents, and they were obviously in control of the station. We had to make damn sure we got them out real quick. If necessary, we were set to blow up the station. And then it got worse."

Dundon stopped, came over and sat down on the desk in front of Web, looking straight at him, watching his reaction. Web was frozen in his chair.

"The rocket," said Dundon slowly, "never came back. It's still up there, floating along a few yards from the station. We can see it clearly. Too clearly, damn it. And the interesting part is this: nobody got out of the rocket. Nobody went into the satellite. The rocket went up and maneuvered itself into orbit alongside the satellite, and there it sits. We haven't been able to contact it by radio either."

II

THERE was an icy sting lancing her arm, and then a million furry brushes began rubbing in her body. In a moment Ivy was totally paralyzed.

Black shapes, dripping and lean, picked her up gently, conducted her through the low hanging trees toward another place where a black square loomed. The hands were impersonal, but never in her life had she been touched like this. She was absolutely terrified. A door was opened. She

was laid upon a dark hard floor. In a moment the floor began to move and she realized through her terror that she was in a truck. But they left her alone. She lay for a long while upon the floor unable to think. She could not possibly understand this, the who or the why, because she had not dreamed about it, or ever even considered it.

She was a girl of great natural sweetness, born of strict, respected parents and a strict, respectable life. What was happening now was so far from reality that she could not believe it. She lay on the floor of the truck trying to close her eyes, but the paralysis was too great and she couldn't. The truck drove on through the raining night, bumping, grinding, carrying her inevitably toward the worst day of terror she had ever known.

There was no question of sabotage. The men who went up, swore Security, were as clean as the driven snow. And in his own mind Dundon agreed. It was remotely conceivable that one man might just possibly slip through the incredibly complex Security check, but this was much too thorough a job. It would require too many men in too many places.

Dundon's next step was clear. Under the president's signature he had called for the Air Force file on flying saucers. He was disgusted to find that the Air Force knew no more than it had published, which was not very much. The file did, however, reach the tentative conclusion that "further investigation might well prove fruitful." Dundon was overcome. He seized a pen and wrote on the report—in great red angry letters—the indelible words:

"You bet your sweet—"

But even further investigation, Dundon realized when he had cooled to a touchable temperature, would probably not help. You could scan the skies with telescopes, until you wore your eyeballs down to the bone, but even if you saw, what could you do? He had a grave conviction that whoever went up the satellite would not come down. There was no way of knowing what was up there or why, and it was a little more than possible that there was a lethal something about space itself which would never let Man off the face of the Earth. Not ever, for the rest of Time.

But somebody had to go. There was nothing else to do. You could not build another satellite, or send up another fully manned rocket, not until you found out what was wrong up there. There was always the chance that the failures were purely mechanical. Maybe, maybe, whoever was sent up would get back down.

And so a man was sent. He had to be a man with a thorough knowledge of the satellite, with an alert and adaptable mind, and at the same time a man whose failure to return would be of no great loss to anyone.

Such a man was Web Hilton.

"NEVER leave your suit," Dundon said urgently, "not for a damn minute. You'll have a large supply of oxygen, enough to see you there and back. Keep your eyes open and report whatever you see. We'll have a line attached to your suit running back through the rocket and broadcasting to us. We'll be in contact with you all the way."

And then he became embarrassed, as a man will in a position where he is sending someone else into a very dirty thing, and all he can do himself is nothing. So he said good luck and that was that.

The ship lifted shortly after midnight. Web rode up encased in his suit, along with the volunteer pilot who was the rocket's only crew. He did not speak to Dundon on the way up. He could not have spoken if he'd tried. But he endured the tremendous acceleration with the patient joy of a man who is about to do some very fast living. No more classes in Trajectory for him, no more teaching an endless chain of men no younger than himself to rise up above him and go out into space. He was an impatient man, he had always been an impatient man, so he rode out into blackness with no qualms at all. But he was not a fool. The qualms began very soon. They began with the sudden end of the acceleration.

The pilot—Joe Falk—spoke over the intercom to see if he was all right. He said he was. This was the signal for Dundon, from Earth, to cut in. They spoke back and forth, not saying very much, with cold shivers running through them, while Falk maneuvered into position. From his seat

below the pilot Web could see nothing but wires, tubing, and a heavy stanchion. He waited. Eventually Falk said:

"Okay Web. In orbit. She's all yours."

Web took a deep breath. Dundon was speaking in his ear.

"Now watch yourself and tell me everything you see. Open the door and let's go."

Web freed himself from his straps, floated cautiously, hand over hand, to the hatch. Falk was right behind him. He spun the hatch and opened it, went through the airlock to the outer door, stepped out into space.

In the great blazing sea in which he found himself he paused for a second, immobile. The stars were brilliant beyond belief. He had forgotten that they would be of different colors, not just dull shades as seen from Earth, and the fiery reds, the yellows, the cool blues and blazing oranges stunned him. He held tight to the airlock, absorbing it all, while Falk came out behind him.

"God!" Web breathed.

"Wassamatter, wassamatter!" Dundon was immediately shouting.

"Nothing," Web said quickly, "I was just looking at the stars."

"Dundon muttered something dark and profane. 'To hell with the stars! Maybe that's what will get you. Man, watch the things that are close!'"

"Okay," Web said with embarrassment, coming to himself and pulling his eyes away. But this was a sight he could not absorb all at once. He felt shaken for several minutes, and unutterably alone.

Off to his right, half-hidden by the bow of the ship, he saw the satellite. The huge gray ring was revolving slowly, rolling silently along above the great green plate of the Earth. Beyond it, dimly, he could see the floating black form of the first rocket. The entire scene was weird, unbelievable, and incredibly beautiful. He waited again while Dundon fumed from below, letting the sense of where he was sink into him. Falk did the same. At last, to Dundon's great relief, they were able to move.

They manned the small taxi pod, shoved off carefully in the direction of the satellite. Falk brought them with a gingerly caution to the turret of the hub. They had to stop a few feet away because the turret was re-

volving, and to try to land the pod while the turret was in motion was useless.

"Jump," said Dundon.

Web gulped. Although he had no sense of gravity, he could not help but feel the absolute emptiness all around him and beneath him. Between him and the Earth, straight down, there was a thousand miles of nothing.

But he rose in the taxi and braced himself. And jumped.

He shot across space and crashed head on into the turret, came very close to cracking his helmet against the gray steel. He swore feebly, but sincerely and with great fright, and clutched for a hold. He had greatly overestimated the power he needed to cross a space in which there was no gravity at all.

But he found a hold at last on a vane of the reflector and hung on grimly, desperately, for several moments.

Dundon asked how he was.

"Delightful," Web muttered, "absolutely delightful." Then he looked around for Falk.

The taxi had been kicked quite some distance away, Falk, white-faced through his helmet, was bringing her slowly back in.

"Easy when you jump, Joe," Web called. "I like to went right through this thing."

Falk grunted. He slipped a rope on the pod and leaped for the turret. Even warned he came in too hard and Web had to grab at him, wildly, with one hand. But now the hard part was done and they were aboard. Web looked around for the airlock.

WEB went in alone. There was no need for both of them inside so Falk waited by the airlock and fed him the radio line. As he spun the wheel which opened the lock and looked down the long tube into darkness he began to feel for the first time the perspiration soaking him.

He took one last look at the whirling stars and then stepped inside the turret.

In the turret there was no gravity, but as he climbed down the landing net toward the rim of the revolving doughnut centrifugal force caught him and gave him weight. It was immensely reassuring. He had a small sealed light at his belt which enabled him to see his way around and at

the base of the turret he came to the main door into the satellite.

He stood on the net and regarded the door silently. Now, if there really was some sabotaging gent on board this thing, right behind this door now would be where he would be. He would have heard the boots clump on the steel, there was no doubt about that. And he would not be hampered by a space suit. Thoughtfully, Web considered the fact that he had no weapon. No weapon but his size. Up to now, this moment, that had always been enough, but he had no illusions about what would happen if there really was somebody alive in there. Still, Dundon would know, and that was his job after all, to let Dundon know.

"Well," said Dundon anxiously.

"Half a mo," Web said. He laid his helmet against the door and listened. Nothing. If he was inside, he wasn't moving. Which was the smart thing to do.

"Okay," Web said, "cross your fingers." He opened the door.

A great bright light shone out of the opening. For a brief moment he was startled, until he realized that it was only the normal electric light of the room, intensified by the black around him. Cautiously, with his handflash held like a club, he stepped into the room.

There was nobody behind the door.

"What's up, what's up?" Dundon called.

"Nothin'," Web said. "Listen, don't keep getting in my hair. I'll tell you what happens as I go along. I'm in the receiving room. Nobody here. But the lights are on."

The room was bare, metal-floored, lined with lockers. Two of the lockers were open, and from where he stood Web could see clothing hanging from pegs. There was nothing unusual about the room, Web described it to Dundon, walked across the floor to the next door.

"Don't take your helmet off," Dundon roared.

"You bet your sweet life," Web grinned.

"I have to leave the doors open a little to let the radio line pass through. The pressure's going down pretty quick."

"Oh," said Dundon. And then after a while he said, "Let's hope there's nobody alive in there."

"If he is," Web said, "he's somebody we

don't need. There's nothing wrong with the reflector. He could have light-signaled any time he wanted to."

Dundon was silent. Web pushed open the door to the next room, which would be the radio shack, and waited. Then he pecked inside. There was no one here either.

"Empty," Web said.

"Stop for a minute," Dundon said. "Put your helmet against the wall."

"I already did," Web said, but he did it again.

"Do you hear anything?"

"Nope. Quiet as a . . . grave."

"Keep listening as you go along."

Good idea. And then he thought of another good idea. He called out to Joe Falk. "Yes?"

"I just wanted to know if you were still out there."

"I don't leave without one hell of a yell," Falk chuckled.

"And you don't leave without me either."

Web faced the next door, the tension mounting. He could not get over the feeling that there had to be somebody aboard. At least there had to be bodies, certainly, because nothing had left the satellite. Forty-seven men had come up here. The bodies were probably all pretty close together. He stopped thinking about that because it only made it difficult to keep on looking. He opened the next door, and there was nobody there either.

He began to have an awful suspicion.

He went cautiously, stealthily, from room to room, made a full round of the doughnut. He never saw anybody. In some rooms there were a number of shoes on the floor, and clothes were strewn around haphazardly, the way men will do when they are living close together. Here was a pipe lying for no apparent reason in the middle of the floor. Here was a chessboard, laid out on a table with a game half completed. Everywhere there was a general sense of confusion, as if these men had suddenly dropped what they were doing and run away. The further he walked, the more he saw, the more fantastic it became. In one room he found four pairs of shoes sitting on the floor, four complete suits of clothes dropped over them exactly as if—

"Dundon!" he cried.

—as if the men in the clothes had ceased to exist.

III

SOMETIME during the night the door of the truck opened and another body was laid beside Ivy on the floor. Until then Ivy had believed that whatever was going to happen at the end of this ride would be reserved for her, and she thought she knew what that happening would be. With the addition of this new body, however, which was also a girl, Ivy was not so sure.

She was completely paralyzed and she could not move a finger. Beside her the other girl did not move either. But she, this other one, was also young and pretty, and Ivy began to think through her terror.

Rape, to Ivy's mind, was the most likely possibility. She fled from the thought. That she was being abducted for other, more permanent reasons was also possible, but she had no idea what they could be. Kidnapping for ransom money was out of the question. Her parents were not wealthy and she herself had only about thirty-three dollars in the bank. The only other thing she could think of was that she was being abducted into white slavery. She made a futile attempt to scream.

Two more bodies, both young girls, joined her in the truck before morning. White slavery began to look horribly believable.

At last the morning came and the truck stopped, and the doors at the rear were thrown open. Ivy was the first to be lifted out.

She found herself being carried up the side of a heavily wooded hill, toward a long low house half-hidden in the pines. She had a chance to look at the man who carried her, and at the other men who were gathered at the back of the truck, and one thing struck her immediately.

All of the men were old. And they all looked strangely alike. They were quite small and round-shouldered, every one of them, with large peculiar eyes and thickly lined faces. There was about them an almost brotherly resemblance, particularly about the nose, which was invariably tiny, thin and sharp, like a small beak. The eerie regularity of their faces was unnerving. She began to

realize that there was something here which was more than just abduction.

She was carried into a long house, and once again she was laid on a floor in darkness. She could not see anyone else but she could feel the presence of bodies, row on row of other bodies. Back in the truck she had tried to cry, but it hadn't worked. She tried again now.

After a while she felt the paralysis beginning to wear off.

Web was now very tired and he sat down. He had gone through the whole station and there was nobody aboard. Forty-seven men, all gone. Dundon had said nothing had approached this station, or left it, but the forty-seven men had, and that was for sure. And he knew that if he bothered to check the other rocket, the lonesome rocket that had come up first, there would be nobody in it either.

"Web."

"Yep?"

"Did you check the space suits?"

"Yep," Web said wearily. "And I counted 'em. They're all here. All in the lockers, never been touched."

"How about the escape pod?"

"That's here too. But they couldn't have got away in that anyway. Radar would have seen it."

Dundon was silent. In the background Web could hear an argument going on. Some of the really high brass were with Dundon now, listening in. Well, Web said to himself gravely, but with a trace of cheer breaking through, the rest is their problem. I've done my job. I think right now I had better go home.

He called to Falk, to let him know that he was coming, and began to retrace his steps, reeling in his radio wire. Falk didn't acknowledge his call, so he called again.

"Joe," he said happily, "I'm a-comin'." Let's clear out o' here."

Falk didn't answer.

"Joe?" Web said.

Nothing.

"Joe?"

He stopped dead in his tracks.

"Dundon," he said thickly.

There was nothing from Dundon either. He was completely alone.

IN THE face of emptiness, surrounded by nothing, as alone as any man will ever be, Web waited. He heard nothing, saw nothing. Within his suit the thumping of his heart was an endless chain of bombs. He decided that he had to get out. He was all the way up the turret before his mind cleared and the unrushing wave of claustrophobia fell away, and he realized what had happened.

Falk hadn't answered. But then, neither had Dundon.

"Well hell," he said aloud, sweating, "so the radio got disconnected." The whole thing had gone blank. Now, if it was just Falk who hadn't answered. . . .

Weakly, he leaned against the airlock, breathing with huge gulps. A plug was out in the rocket, or down at the base, or a tube was blown, and for this reason he had very nearly made a fool of himself. For all he knew they could hear him. He began to talk anyway, questioning, liking the sound of his voice in the really absolute silence.

He stepped out of the turret looking for Falk. He had had a rough day, and it was time to go home. To his great relief he saw Falk standing a few feet away on the turret's side, his magnetized soles gripping the metal and his head looking out toward the stars. He was not hanging on to anything, he seemed to be totally unconcerned, and his arms were lifted strangely.

Web whistled. Now there, he said to himself, is a man with nerve. He slipped hand over hand down the turret to get to Falk and the taxi.

Falk didn't move as he approached. Falk just kept looking at the stars.

Come on boy, Web said aloud, let's get moving. He came up and laid his helmet against Falk's, so they could talk to each other.

But he didn't say anything.

Directly in front of his eyes was the plate of Falk's helmet, and inside the helmet was nothing.

Web withdrew. The empty suit before him swayed slightly as he brushed it.

This is ridiculous, Web said. I'm going nuts.

Around him moved the whirling stars.

I'm screwy as a jaybird, Web said.

5—PLANET—Winter

THE arrival of Kunklin and Prule was neither coincidental nor particularly fortunate. There is an indescribable something which a spaceship traveling at speeds beyond light does to the fabric of space, warping, shredding, leaving a trail which lasts for many days. Kunklin did not need a great deal of luck to pick it up, as he did, just a short way in from Alpha Centauri. He was equipped with a ship of the Central Repair Command, one of the most diversely powerful mechanisms ever produced by a living mind. Thus Kunklin and Prule arrived with great haste, but with no great luck. They were too late to prevent the deaths of the forty-seven men—for death it was—or the death of Joe Falk.

And so it was that while Web was sitting numbly on a projection of the turret, making a mortal effort to control himself, he became watched, in turn, by two separate sets of alien eyes.

The first set of eyes—which were more or less human in structure, differing only in their purple color—belonged to Kunklin and Prule. They had swept in a wide arc around the crescent-lit limb of the Moon, and halted at a discreet distance to survey the terrain before going in. Telescopes of an impossible resolving power picked out first the station, then the rockets, and eventually Web Hilton. Because they had a knowledge of the aliens, and of the type of crime that the aliens would commit, they knew at a glance what had happened aboard the satellite.

But, at the sight of it, Kunklin was startled.

"A space station!" he cried. "Well I'll be jetted." And not yet having noticed the empty suit of Falk—the arms of which had begun to float out helplessly, like a beggar—Kunklin regarded the doughnut with a delighted interest.

Prule, a square, gloomy man who was always the more sober of the two, grunted darkly.

"They put up a space station right in the midst of being plundered, poor devils. They must have walked right into it."

It was Kunklin's turn to be sombre.

"There's been killing."

"Undoubtedly," Prule growled with disgust. "The Faktors could not allow these

people to be in space. They would see too much. Note the empty suit . . ."

It was at this point that Web stepped out of the turret and saw Falk.

Kunklin watched curiously.

"A Faktor?"

"No. One of the people of this planet. Note the primitive equipment." Pause. "This is extraordinary."

"You mean because he's alive?"

"Of course. The others are dead. Why is this one still alive?"

Kunklin was the younger one, cocky and in many ways indolent, but he had by far the quicker mind.

"He is alive," Kunklin said swiftly, "because he is a Galactic. Let us go down."

The second set of eyes that was observing the satellite did not see Web come out of the turret. The brain behind those eyes was rejoicing as it approached the satellite. The plundering was very nearly done. All that remained now was a brief investigation, and then destruction of this station, and the bone and blood and magnificent flesh of these people would remain in free supply below, unwarned and unaware.

The alien landed on the skin of the doughnut, switched off his gravity pack, and walked cheerfully around toward the turret.

And at the turret, of course, Web Hilton was still sitting, slowly regaining his mind. It was at that moment occurring to Web that if there was a logical explanation for all this it would not be found up here, or by him, and he was just then considering the quickest way down to Earth—via rocket or escape pod in the station. He had not quite made up his mind when he saw the alien.

It is difficult to say which of them was the most surprised.

The alien had been under the impression that anything human that had been on the satellite no longer existed. Indeed, there was no possible way that anything human could exist on the satellite. So therefore, Web Hilton was not human. The alien was shocked.

But for Web, who had recently undergone some extraordinary events, this was by far the most fantastic of all. For the alien was an adaptation. An artificial oxygen-producing mechanism in his chest, together

with silicone-adapted skin and a number of similarly ingenious devices, enabled the alien to walk freely in space, which he did clad only in a short white cloth and a gravity pack. And what Web saw come walking toward him over the surface of the station, in open space, with the moon and the stars for a background, was a naked man. The alien wore no space suit.

The door behind him was open, Web fell back into the turret.

When a great many impossible things have happened to a man within a very short time there comes a jumping-off place. The man jumps outside himself and continues to survive by examining the whole thing from outside, with a sort of awed detachment. It was this way with Web.

"I am nuts," he kept saying to himself, insistently, as he rolled down the landing net and came up with a thump against the door below. But he did not feel nuts. His mind had been numbed and dulled at the edges, but for some reason now outside it he was thinking very clearly. For the disappearance of everybody there was no explanation, but for the appearance of the naked man there had to be. The suspicion which he had first heard back at the base, over many a beer, was truth to him now, because he had to believe his eyes or go mad. And there was only one thing the naked man could be. An alien. A thing from another world, as the movies put it. A thing with cunning and science. A thing that had destroyed Falk.

Now think, he said to himself carefully, bolting the door behind him. You are no match for them. You don't know how many of them are out there or what they have. Maybe this is the first time they know you are alive and somehow they missed you when they got Falk. So get out.

GET OUT.

He raced through the station, heading for the escape pod. He had to get down to Earth. With what coherence he could muster, he had to tell somebody about this, although it did not yet make any sense. But it would, it would, it would have to. The naked man had been a man, yes, but he had white round marble eyes and a knifelike, inhuman nose. If they were on Earth, his kind could be found.

Web lowered himself into the escape pod, strapped himself down and pressed the button. The pod shot down from the station, down and away, and a great orange flame spread out from its bow. It lost speed quickly, steadily, as the rockets pushed it back. After a while the flames died out. The pod began to fall.

IV

JUST as Ivy could feel the ability to move returning, the old men came for her. She realized with despair that they knew quite well how long the paralysis would last. They helped her to her feet and walked her out of the building. Their hands were dry and raspy and surprisingly strong.

Outside it was late in the morning and the sun was high. She was on the side of a mountain, looking down into a peaceful valley. They led her around the low building into a shaded area farther up the mountain, where she saw several more buildings, much smaller than the first. The first, she thought, was a clearing house.

"How do you feel?" said the man on her left, grinning. "Do you feel very good?"

He stressed the 'good' for a reason she did not understand. Apparently the word meant something to him. His grin was wide and his teeth showed remarkably white and firm. The other old man was grinning too.

"I'm hungry," she said. She did not ask these men why she was here. She thought she knew, and if she didn't she would find out soon enough.

"Very soon," the first man said, "if you are good enough."

Now again she did not know what he meant, but this was more obvious. The way he spoke, his grin fading, was particularly horrible. Before she had a chance to say anything more she was ushered into one of the small buildings beneath the trees.

She found herself in a room with several terrified girls, and two more of the old men. These looked even older and were much more businesslike.

One by one, too frightened to struggle, the girls were stripped. Like doctors, the two old men examined them clinically. There was an oldness, a foul and slimy something about these gaunt men that was

almost overpoweringly horrible. She wanted to run, or to scream, or just to fight, but she held herself in and waited for the right moment.

She was allowed to take her clothes off herself, was pushed and prodded for several grisly moments. At last she was led naked into another room, where a massive machine of glass and metal was wheeled into place above her, and set to a deep, jarring hum. After a few seconds she was given back her clothes. Then she was taken outside into the sun again, where the other girls stood waiting.

The same two old men took her arms.

One bent over and looked closely into her eyes, his nose almost touching hers. He was grinning now with great joy.

"You were good enough," he said happily, "now you will eat."

She stared at him, revolted as his dry rough hand ran down her arm. Then she saw something which made her understand.

Five girls had been in the building with her.

Only three had come out.

The controls of the escape pod were preset. It checked its fall with controlled, measured bursts, fell quickly and steeply until it bounced off the atmosphere. Once in the air the stubby wings took hold and the pod began to glide, blasting from time to time to slow itself down. There was no light in the pod, and Web rode all the way down in a silent, rushing, horrible blackness. He had plenty of time to consider the fact that the pod had never been used before. It had never even been tested. Well, he thought philosophically, if it did not work he would undoubtedly never feel the end.

That did not help at all. He waited, falling.

Not long before the pod hit he began to hear the air scream past, and he braced himself. The braking rockets cut loose for the last time. There was one great rending crash, a series of enormous pops like corks being pulled on the biggest bottles in the world, and a really awful, shattering, bone-mangling impact. And then the pod was down.

In the last moment Web had closed his eyes. When he opened them he saw light

streaming in through a large crack above him.

It's all busted up, he told himself dazedly. Better get out. He unbuckled his straps and poked himself fearfully. The hammock had held well enough, but it had been designed for a much smaller man. When the pod hit he had sort of flowed over the edges of the hammock, there were long numb lines all over his body.

But the pod might just possibly decide to burn. He crawled out painfully, but as quickly as possible.

Outside it was mid-afternoon. A desert afternoon. The sun was high and white-hot, blinding. He closed his eyes, trying to accustom himself to the glare. He thanked both God and the engineers that the pod had apparently come down where it was supposed to come down—in the great empty area in Arizona. Radar would have followed him down, therefore rescue trucks were already on their way. They would cross the rough terrain in a couple of hours. A helicopter should be here even sooner. He breathed deeply and a bit more easily, beginning to feel much better.

It occurred to him at last that he still had on his space suit. He took off the helmet, regretted it almost instantly.

The air-scorched skin of the pod by his side was glowing a brisk cherry red, radiating slow thick waves of boiling air. Web walked quickly away in the sand. The October sun was hot, but the pod was even worse. He looked around in the desert, beginning now to feel very tired, looking for a place to shelter himself, to rest until the relief came.

He walked off over the nearest rocky hill, searched among the huge boulders. Distances were deceptive. He had walked quite a way before he found two gray slabs which leaned together and formed a dark opening beneath. He made sure that he could see enough of the desert to know when the relief trucks came. Then he crawled inside.

He had just settled himself to wait, his eyes closing, when the pod blew up.

The sound came at him like a thundering wall. He whirled to face the desert.

Where the pod had been rose an enormous, greasy, ball-topped cloud. The explo-

sion was overwhelming. The whole land shook as the concussion rolled over him, the sky and the air were black around him. After a while the dirt and the rocks began to rain down in a heavy brown splatter and he huddled in the rocks.

Atomic. They were after him.

He started to rise, agonized and tensed, thinking about the aliens and about radio-activity. But before he reached his feet his mind took hold of him and he stopped.

There was no where to go. If he stepped out into the open he would be seen at once, seen from practically any distance. He looked up into the sky, past the tall black column of smoke. Nothing.

He sat. Maybe they hadn't followed him down. They might not have had time for that. Friction was friction, they could travel through the air no faster than he could. So probably what they had done was send some kind of missile after him. It could not have come down much faster than the pod, it would have burned up, so what it had done was give him just enough time to get out. He thanked God that he had.

He leaned weakly against a rock. After a moment he crawled as deeply as he could into the darkness. There was still no place to go. The aliens might be very close, and he could take no chance on missing the relief trucks.

He was becoming rapidly very tired. If he did not want to have to walk all the way out of the desert, he would have to stay right here. Boy, he said to himself painfully, wearily, you got big trouble. He sat down to brood, too tired to remind himself that he had volunteered for this business.

In a few moments he was deeply asleep.

WHEN he awoke it was dark and quite cool and the stars were out. He was instantly alert, peering off into the blackness, listening for the rescue trucks. He crawled out from the rocks and stood up, peered off into the night.

There was no moon, but off in what would be the east was the first bluish glow of the rising sun. That told him at least how long he had slept, and he kicked himself. It was somewhere between four and five in the morning. The truck would have been here long ago.

He walked away from the rocks, looking for a high point on which to stand. They wouldn't have gone away, damn it, they'd have enough sense to stay and look around. Although if they thought he had been in the pod. . . .

Holy smoke, he said with a sad despair, I've got to walk home.

He hadn't eaten for a day and a half. He hadn't had anything to drink either, or even a cigarette. He was beginning to feel it. He made his way up through the rocks to a high, flat bulge, stretched himself up and peered out hopefully.

The trucks rose up about a mile away. Three black hulks, vague and square and unmoving.

Web shouted out hoarsely, with relief and delight. He stumbled back down the rocks in the darkness, reached the soft sand and began to run like a sprinter. They'd waited, bless 'em. The sound of a human voice would be, at this moment, magnificent. He could taste the hot coffee as he ran, the steaming hot coffee and the rolls. They were probably all around him, searching. He shouted.

Nobody answered. It was becoming light quite quickly and although the ground was still dark the silhouettes of the trucks stood out black and clear as he came over the last rise.

He stopped in his tracks, kicking up sand.

The trucks were wrecked.

He crouched tensely, feeling for a gun that wasn't there.

Nothing moved in the blackness around him. The trucks were all black and empty. After a moment of waiting in the deep silence he moved forward slowly.

The first truck had crashed head on into a flat rock wall. The second lay on its side in a steep ditch to the right of the road. The third lay right behind it. The only one that was apparently untouched was the half-track.

It was standing alone halfway up a sand hill to the south, its nose pointed up at a sharp angle. All of the trucks were empty. But in the half light he couldn't be sure.

He walked up to the half-track, looking for the bodies.

There weren't any. When he had looked

around for a few moments, he realized what had happened. The men had all disappeared.

He was a little more ready for it now, but it was by no means easy to take. On the seat of the half-track he found two fatigue caps, two twill shirts, two pairs of pants.

On the floor were the shoes and socks. The men had disappeared rapidly, while the trucks were still moving.

Web looked up into the sky.

None of the stars were moving.

But the aliens would be coming back soon. He climbed into the half-track, threw out the clothes and started the engine. The thing had stalled, probably, running off by itself up a hill. He was lucky. The motor turned over. He was going quickly away, in no particular direction, when he remembered food.

He stopped the half-track and looked in the back.

Towing apparatus, to take the pod back.

He groaned.

The second truck had burned, was still hot, but the third was intact. He found some K-rations and an untouched thermos, opened the thermos immediately and gulped down a huge draught of pleasantly warm coffee. With the coffee in him he felt much better and began to think.

He would have to get out of here damn fast.

But where?

In the least likely direction.

Which was?

In the opposite direction to the base?

No. At right angles. Better yet, at any old angle. Neither directly toward home, nor directly away. Not by any means toward the nearest town.

So just run.

But first cigarettes—and money.

He rifled the first pair of pants he found, then another. The second had belonged to an officer. In a moment of sudden clarity, realizing the uselessness in town of the overalls he now wore, he took the full uniform with him. He did not think about the man that had been in them. He was coming fully awake now, beginning to realize the jam he was in. He had as much chance of getting out of this desert alive as a crippled snail.

He started up the halftrack and drove off over the sand at an even eighteen miles an hour.

"THERE he goes," said Kunklin. "What is that thing he is driving?"

"Extraordinary," Prule agreed. "You'd think that even with their primitive technology these poor souls would have reasonably comfortable conveyances."

"And faster," Kunklin said. "The Faktors will be back."

"Where are they now?"

"North. They reason, obviously, that he has slipped through on the ground. They are taking no chance on the bong having missed, which is characteristically thorough. They are fanning out from the North, beginning to ring the desert."

"There is no hurry then. If the Faktors think he is a Galactic they will be very discreet, very cautious."

Kunklin turned from the eyepiece, his handsome face lighted with interest.

"Listen, now there's a thing we'll have to discuss. Could this man be a Galactic?"

"Fully? No, of course not," Prule sniffed. "A Galactic run from a Faktor? Humph!"

"But he undoubtedly has Galactic blood," said Kunklin cheerfully, "else how do you explain his escape from the satellite?"

"True," said Prule seriously, "but that is not particularly extraordinary. He has Galactic blood. So do hundreds of humanoid peoples on hundreds of worlds. As long as we allow tourists to visit any world they choose, whether it's aware of us or not, we will continue to find people with traces of Galactic blood. This is a failing of human nature which I expressly—"

But Kunklin was grinning widely.

"You mean his father?"

"Or mother," Prule said dourly. "Either party might well have been at fault. It is not difficult to conjecture. A tourist drops in on this planet, notes the—ah—male or female, as the case may be—to have a certain measure of attraction, and the normal processes ensue. Most likely, of course the tourist was his father. A Galactic mother would have done—ah—whatever it is that—ah—well of course."

Prule, who was something of a moralist, became somewhat flustered. Kunklin, who

was young and handsome and no moralist at all, grinned lecherously.

"Well, by Cosmos! This is really cute. I'll bet he doesn't even know!"

"In all probability. Since the laws decree silence, it is not likely that even his mother knew."

Kunklin looked back at the halftrack, chortling.

"Well, really, we have to look after him. Blood brother, I think the phrase goes."

Prule drew himself up with great dignity.

"Agent Kunklin, we must look after them *all*. There must be no more killing. First the satellite, then the trucks, then the helicopter—"

"Was there a helicopter?"

"Yes. I was too late to save it. Although I did remove the small Faktor ship that destroyed it."

Kunklin brooded.

"Well now, really, it's about time we did something, don't you think?" Prule said.

Kunklin nodded.

"Yes. Unfortunately, there is only one thing we can do."

"Use the Earthman? Um. I had expected that."

"What other course is there? They think he's a Galactic. They'll try to get him in any way possible, to stop a patrol ship from arriving on the scene. And we, already here, have no way of knowing where on this planet they are, where they've cached their—uh—spoils. Hence we must follow the Earthman."

"Well, after all, it is his planet," Prule said.

"His *women*," Kunklin corrected.

LATE in the afternoon the halftrack struck a road. It climbed up onto it and Web pressed full speed to thirty. He had considered hiding the halftrack somewhere during the day and going on at night, but there was really no place to hide, and the aliens would probably double back and find the halftrack missing and come looking for it very soon, and they could probably see in the dark anyway. So he got out of the desert as quickly as he could.

In all, three separate scouting crews found him in the first four hours. They died silent-

ly, above him, without him being even slightly aware of their existence.

He had plenty of time to think. The big mystery, of course, was why in hell he hadn't disappeared along with everybody else. The damn things certainly wanted to kill him, or why had they followed the pod down? Well somehow, they had missed him. And he had been so doggone lucky up until now that he was beginning to feel invulnerable. He considered the whole business from beginning to end, trying to figure out what they were and why they wanted nobody in the satellite.

They wanted no Earthmen in space.

Then why didn't they just blow the thing up?

Maybe they were worried about starting a war. Maybe—yes—they wanted nobody up there because anybody up there could see what they were doing, would give an alarm, but a full scale war would be the worst thing that could happen, because they were undoubtedly somewhere on Earth right now, and they would be caught in the middle of it.

After that much thinking he was through. In the end, of course, there was no way of knowing, but whatever it was they wanted it was certainly pretty bad. Bad enough to kill him, which was all the bad he needed.

He pushed the halftrack at full speed down the road.

In the next town he stole a car. He did it quite simply, not bothering to explain, because he was in something of a hurry. He approached the car he wanted as it was standing at the curb, as its owner, a small, beefy man with a greasy shirt, was just getting out. He took the keys away from the man and took the car.

At the first town he came to he parked the car quickly, headed for the nearest phone booth, and tried to call Dundon.

He couldn't get through. Neither Dundon nor the colonel were "available," and there was no one else there who knew who he was, or what he was doing. And he could take no time to explain. Dundon and the Colonel were probably out looking for him. He swore thoroughly, but all he could do was leave his name, and ask for the message to be left that he had called, and was in the town of Huntsville. It was a heck of

a situation, but he was stuck. Who would send an escort for a drunk-sounding second lieutenant?

He walked out of the booth, realizing that he must forget about the car outside, and now that he had spent a few consecutive seconds in one place he felt a deep nervousness beginning. He searched through the people around him, expecting any moment the coming of wide, white eyes and knife-like noses. But the people here were all apparently human.

Although you couldn't know. Easy to disguise eyes with contact lenses.

He left a store, found a hotel room. He could not seek safety with the police. They would all disappear. Anyone he went to would disappear. There was nothing to do now but hide. He lay down on a bed and waited.

V

THE food they gave her was thick red meat, half-cooked. They sat down beside her, three of the old men, together in a small bare hut. None of them ate. They watched her, grinning, speaking lowly and incoherently among themselves.

She felt like a blue-ribbon heifer. Best of breed. She found out that she couldn't eat very much.

"Food," an old man said with concern, pointing at her plate. He apparently knew less English than the rest. "Food," he repeated insistently, making the motions of eating.

"No," Ivy said. She rose up suddenly and shook her head. "I don't want any." If they wanted her to eat, maybe she'd better not eat.

Maybe there was something in the food—

They looked her over thoroughly as she stood before them, grinning horribly. They were not too concerned that she did not eat. Later, if necessary, they would come back with vials and needles.

The three men rose. One of them motioned the others to leave. They bowed and walked out, looking back over their shoulders to grin.

She faced the old man across the low wooden table.

"It is perhaps time that you learn why

you are here," the old man said quietly. His English was perfect. His face was detached, unsmiling.

She waited.

"You are to be used for breeding," the old man said.

She stared, not understanding.

"I will be brief," he said, still quietly, his eyes white and steady. "The sooner you realize the nature of our purpose the sooner you will be content. There is no virtue in resistance. We can keep you under paralysis indefinitely"—he smiled slightly—"for the full nine months, if necessary. Do you understand?"

She began to back slowly away.

The old man continued to smile.

"It is possible that you have already guessed that we are not—human. If not I tell you so now. Our race has its origins in a system of which you have undoubtedly never heard. But that is no matter. Our races are compatible genetically. In the end you will breed."

He paused, watching her with a calm amusement. Ivy could not move.

"Our race is very old, much, much older than yours. It is also, in a sense, biologically old. In effect, the race is dying. It has been dying for quite some time. We have managed to keep ourselves—virile—by use of the obvious method. It is for this reason that we are here. We need new blood. Young blood. We must interbreed."

He walked slowly and calmly around the edge of the table.

"You have been chosen to bear our children. This is no particular honor, I know, but I will repeat that you cannot possibly succeed in resisting. Be practical, perform your function. If you are tractable, you will be given much. If you are stubborn, you will be paralyzed. You will not under any circumstances be killed or allowed to die. You will have company. We have—collected—many of your race, both male and female. You will not, of course, be allowed association with the males."

He turned and strode to the door. He paused with his hand on the knob, his smile grew wide and his teeth showed.

"I think it best that you be paralyzed now."

Ivy still could not move. There was in

all this a dreamlike quality which she could not believe. Within her mind she slowly retreated.

The old man opened the door. Two men who had been waiting came quickly in, clutched her, injected her. In a moment she lay on the floor, the drug hanging heavily on her wildly pulsing heart.

The first old man stood over her, pulled out a small notebook.

"You are lucky," he said, with an ironic smile, "I think I will breed you myself."

He bent down and touched her. The white eyes grew dark at the edges.

"I think I will breed you tomorrow," he said.

THE scout ship of the Galactics hung in a hole in space several feet in the air above Main Street. The bending mechanism was on, light rays were diverted around it. It was invisible, unapproachable, although it admitted enough light so that it itself could see. Kunklin and Prule, who were for a while similarly almost nonexistent, floated down from the ship and walked away curiously in the middle of the street. They adjusted themselves to solidity in the alley behind Web's hotel. The power necessary to maintain the bender was enormous, and had to come from portable power sources, and they decided that it would be best to save power for emergencies. Prule searched for a moment through a small, voluted lens. He found Web.

"What's he doing?"

"Nothing."

"Ingenious man. Is he armed?"

"No."

"Um. We cannot permit him to be killed."

"Well, he is apparently very strong."

"There are times when that helps."

"Still, we had better record him."

"Wait. He's coming down."

It was time to do something. Web did not know what, but he had to do something. There was a phone in the shabby little foyer, but he passed it by. It had occurred to him that Dundon would be no help at all. He stepped out into the street.

He had a strong flecting impulse to tell somebody, anybody, just for the companion-

ship of another human being. Immediately, the thought passed.

"I have just come down from a space satellite," he would say, "where I encountered forty-seven disappearing men and a naked man in open space—"

He looked around for the nearest drugstore. It was quite dark in the streets and he was not too conspicuous in the tight army clothes—a field jacket will fit an elephant—but he could not help feeling like a neon sign. But a gun. He needed a gun, and a quick way out of here.

Hell, where could you get a gun?

From the police.

He looked around seriously and purposefully, but no blue coat was near. He walked into the drugstore.

At the counter there were five people. All with their backs turned. The counter man was a young boy with a fat nose. Web slipped into the phone booth, deciding on an impulse to call Dundon anyway. It was possible that he would die soon, and there ought to be someone who knew about the naked man.

In his pockets were a half dollar and three pennies. No other change. He swore.

At that moment he looked up out of the booth, saw a small, dry man walk stiffly into the store.

He froze.

There was something—

The man looked around, saw him.

The man was old, his face was expressionless. His eyes were all right, were dark and usual, but his nose was alien.

There was no doubt about that. To any other human it would look merely odd, but to Web it was alien. Knifelike and alien.

They stood facing each other across the few feet of store. Web reached again for the gun he did not have. Quickly—but with a gliding smoothness, in no hurry at all—the alien turned away. He sat down on a stool at the fountain.

Web stood for several seconds in the booth, watching.

He tried to think, but there was no time. Others would be gathering outside. He fought the impulse to run. After a long moment he opened the door of the booth and walked out into the store. The alien did not turn. The huge glass window of

the store was unblocked, Web could see dozens of shoppers pass by in the night. In the crowd there would be old men. To go out now was foolish.

He walked over to the fountain and sat down two seats away from the alien. There was a fat, soda-eating woman between them. He ordered coffee.

No way out. They were not likely to come in, but there was no way out. Through the back door would be useless. Darker, less people. He looked down toward the alien. The little man was sitting quietly, the glass untouched before him. The nose was sharp in profile.

Web made up his mind quickly, in the only way possible. His strength, his size was his only asset. He would have to use it.

He paid for his coffee, picked up his change, then stood up and looked for the light switch. There were four long fluorescent tubes above him, no chance to break them all. He saw the light switch against the back wall, then took a deep breath.

He walked up quickly behind the alien.

The little man did not move.

"You," Web said.

The alien face swung toward him.

"Get up," Web said.

The dry face whitened, but the expression did not change and the old man did not say anything.

"I asked you to get up," Web said gently.

His right hand hung low, Web clamped down on the alien's frail shoulder and jerked him to his feet. When the alien opened his mouth, Web hit him low. The man doubled. Web picked him up and heaved him the full length of the store, in the direction of the light switch. He leaped after the hurtling body, threw the switch.

In the sudden blessed blackness he found the alien's head on the floor, crashed it down twice with a great, nerveless strength. Frantically, savagely, while the fat lady screamed and the few other people bellowed toward the door, he searched the alien's pockets. There was nothing resembling a gun. What he found he jammed quickly into his own pocket, then whirled and waited, crouching.

Outside were shouts, and a crowd was

forming. When there were enough people outside he stood up and ran for the door.

He weighed two hundred and forty pounds. He came through the door like a freight express, ripped into the crowd with all the power of his enormous body. He went through and over, came out the other side, let out his speed and began to run.

A light orange flame touched a brick wall near him, glowed briefly on a car, on a post, on a sign above him. He swerved. There was an alley, dark and open.

He ran into it, over the fence at the other end, and through a back yard. The flame followed in soft bursting balls. He was in another alley with open light in front of him, when the flame caught up with him.

It took him just under the right shoulder blade, burned a hole clean through him in the space of a second. He died on his feet, still running.

The recording was made in the drugstore, from an alley a few feet away. It was made just in time for the Galactics to turn their talents to other things. Altogether they had observed seven Faktors in the crowd that gathered in front of the store. Kunklin had already obliterated the four who lay in wait in the darkness at the rear, and the three at the hotel.

It was not difficult. There is no single being in the entire galaxy with the massed, polarized power of a Galactic repairman.

They found Web's body in the alley. It was of no use anymore, to anybody, and was inconvenient. So they dissolved it.

WHEN Web awoke there was a light gentle clicking in his mind that he did not follow at all. He lay listening to it for a long while, gathering himself, creeping out of a thick numbness.

And then he sat bolt upright.

He was on a train.

The clicking was the sound of wheels against rails. He stared at the room around him, at the open window and the flat green fields rolling by beyond it. For a moment he was extremely dizzy. He lowered his head and waited.

After a while his head cleared and he could stand up. He walked unsteadily to the

window and looked out, saw nothing but fields and quick-swishing poles. He turned back to the bunk on which he had been lying. He was alone in the compartment.

A train?

How in God's name did he get on a train?

The last thing he remembered was a numbing crouch, a heart-bursting need for action. Slowly at first, then with great clarity, he remembered being on the floor of the drugstore, waiting for the crowd to gather so he could make a dash for the door.

But he could not remember moving. He could not remember anything but crouching. And then—nothing. His memory ended like a burned-out match.

And there were no bruises or lumps on his head. He felt it carefully to make sure. The only pain he felt anywhere in his body was a dull, left-over aching in his side—that had come from the landing in the pod.

Well somehow, obviously, he had been knocked out.

But—the train.

Dammit, hadn't they been trying to kill him?

It made no sense. Never in his life had his mind just up and gone blank. But he had not been hit. He had been paralyzed somehow, and taken out of the drugstore and—

He put his hand in his pocket. For the first time it occurred to him that he was wearing different clothes.

He sat down abruptly, looked down at himself with increasing amazement. The army clothes were gone. In their place was a stiff white shirt and brown tweed pants, and a loosely knotted red plaid tie. His eyes leaped to the door of the compartment. A matching tweed coat, obviously new, hung from a wire coat hanger.

Am I me? he asked himself. He was utterly lost.

Across from the bunk there was a small wash room and a mirror. He went over and looked at himself. He had not seen himself in a white shirt for a long time and for a moment it was odd, but then, it was his own face. There was no change. And he needed a shave.

He went back and sat down on the bed.

The minutes ticked by and when he had

sat long enough without thinking of anything at all he caught a firm grip on himself and tried to go back over the whole thing. It was none of it real, and he immediately rejected it. He had not gone up in a satellite at all, or driven a halftrack out of a desert, and there was no naked man—

Yes he had. He damn well had.

He was Lieutenant Augustus Webster Hilton, and all of this had happened. He focused again on where he was.

A train. Alone.

Bound for where?

He moved suddenly, with a baffled, growing anger. One thing at least he could find out. He stood up and put on the jacket. He was on his way out to find a porter when he felt the bulge in his pocket.

Instantly, he remembered the things he had taken from the dead alien. They had been transferred to the pocket of his new clothes. The courtesy of it struck him as incredible. He spread the things out on the bed.

There was a set of keys, ordinary keys. There was a metallic disc about the size of a quarter, engraved with meaningless figures. A coin? A lucky piece? Probably a coin. There was a handkerchief, soiled, and a small box of pasty white tablets. He put them down immediately. The important thing was a card. A calling card, on the face of which, simply printed, were the words:

ALBERT BOSCO, M.D.
213 WINGATE RD.
CHICAGO, ILL.

The card was white paper, nothing unusual, but he stared at it with mixed amazement and disbelief. It occurred to him for a rather horrible second that the man he had killed might conceivably not have been an alien.

But no. He recalled the nose clearly. The nose was alien, the man was alien. And where he had gotten the card, and what use he had for it, had probably died with him.

And then, of course, there was no reason why an alien named Albert Bosco could not be a doctor.

But that was all he had gotten from the alien's pockets. It was a curiously ordinary

and unexciting mess of nothing, there was no trace here of anything not human. But it did give him one thing: his destination.

And whoever had put him on the train knew that too.

The first porter he found let slip, luckily, that his name had been given as Mr. Pringle. Where they got that one, or how they got him on the train, Web was never to know. And yessir, why suttinly, sir, said the porter, looking at him oddly, as he had every right to look, this here now train sho does stop at Chicago.

When he left the train at Chicago it was after midnight.

Dammit, he said to himself bitterly, I got to do everything at night.

He had planned to dodge around the station a bit before leaving, but there was no crowd. The place was wide and bare, stony, with a few night travelers dozing on benches. None of them he could see had sharp noses.

But now he was not sure whether they were after him or not, because—

—who in God's name had put him on the train?

He brooded for a while in a small coffee shop, but it got more and more complicated. Since the aliens had not killed him, and in fact obviously meant for him to go to Chicago and look up this man Bosco, there was no way to understand the bombing of the pod, or the empty trucks, or anything. Were there two kinds of aliens, the good guys and the bad guys? That was possible. His mind opened up. If you accept the presence of one alien, you might just as well accept dozens.

And that was quite a thought. As a matter of fact, how many aliens were there, really? The whole darn world could be shot through with aliens, skinny ones, fat ones, straight ones, bent ones, maybe all the odd-looking people he knew were aliens. Maybe even, maybe Dundon was an alien.

He looked around furtively. In a coffee shop, late at night and not a very clean coffee shop, it is remarkable how thoroughly inhuman people can look.

He left the shop.

Well, he had no way of knowing what was up, who was good or who was bad. But a lot of men had died, and until he

knew why, and who did it, and how, and could protect himself, he was going to trust nobody. He was not going to walk deserted streets in the middle of the night looking for Bosco. He hailed a cab for the Statler Hotel. To his relief, he found that there was a Statler in Chicago.

He was given a room for which he could not possibly pay if he stayed here for any length of time, and he thought once more of Dundon.

He would have to call Dundon. He would explain the last few hours as some kind of amnesia, during which he had gotten out of the drugstore safely, bought some new clothes, read the alien's card, and boarded a train for Chicago, all without knowing it.

Although that was the most logical explanation, there was an odd feeling in his mind and he did not believe it. But he decided to tell Dundon that anyway.

It was while he was making the call that the Faktors found him again.

VI

TOWARD morning reality began to close in upon Ivy with a cold, numbing flow. She sat examining the things around her, the wall, the table, the ceiling. As the morning came on a soft rose crept into the sky. She went to the plastic window and stood watching the dawn.

This thing was going to happen.

The impossibility was fading now as the sun rose and the huts across the way stepped out of darkness. That old, that horrible thing, that dry, wrinkled thing. . . .

She was too much afraid, and revolted, to cry. What followed now was an animal fear, an animal desperation, and for the first time she felt an urgent, vital energy gathering within her. She had to get out, she had to get away. This thing was unbelievable and could not happen at all, not ever, because she would not let it happen. She moved back from the window and began to pace her cage.

And the anger was replaced by a dissolving helplessness. She had no plan. She searched, thought desperately, pleaded with herself, but she had no plan. When they came all she could do would be fight, which

would not be enough, and the thing would happen.

Eventually, because carrying this load in her mind was much too great, she tried at last to accept it. If she could just endure. She would have to shut off her mind, like a radio is shut off, and live inside herself, in silence.

She knew that would not work either.

By mid-morning it became obvious that the man was in no hurry, or was busy. He did not come after breakfast, and she waited out the morning. She was just beginning to begin to hope when two of the older men, the guards, came into the hut.

It was evidently a formal thing, this breeding. They took her clothes, gave her a single, pale yellow garment which reached not quite to her knees. She put it on. The two old men were dressed differently today, in soft pastel robes which were flowing and ridiculous around their spindly legs. She gathered that today there would be a celebration.

One of the old men gave her the needle as she stood dressing, before she had a chance to struggle. She was lain for the last time upon the floor, to wait for the evening.

And then, to her great amazement, a calm possession took over her. All the school girl fear and disgust and revulsion fell away for a moment, and she examined the situation critically.

What the hell, she said to herself, startled but at the same time pleased at the feel of strength in her.

What was this after all? This was sex, really, so what? It was going to happen? Well, let it happen. It happened to other women, and it had not killed them. Now it was going to happen to her, and she would certainly live through it, and since none of it was her fault, there was merely a physical thing that took place, like in the old days when girls were married against their will, so she guessed she could bear it.

She was shocked at herself. But she felt her sanity, which had slowly begun to slip away, return with a rush. Her youth did not return with it. She would have preferred to have her initiation take place in some other manner, certainly, with someone more suitable, and she knew that afterwards she might regret it all very much.

But she had a whole afternoon to pass lying flat on her back and thinking, and she passed the afternoon in growing up quickly, as countless women had done before her, helpless and alone, captured in war by barbarian soldiers.

"I SAID this is Hilton, by God! Me. Web. Lieutenant Hilton!"

It was a little while, understandably, before Dundon got hold of the idea of the aliens. And then—also with great understanding—Web decided not to tell him the full story. Not over the phone. In person it would be bad enough, but over the phone it was too great an effort, and anyway, he was not really sure that he was himself. He told Dundon where he was.

"Chicago? Chicago? Chica—"

"That's right, chief. Chicago. You got it. I'm in the Statler Hotel. Incidentally, I need quite a buck to pay my way out. And if you will come here right away I will tell you what's up."

Dundon was still asking him about Chicago.

"At the Statler," Web insisted, "under my own name. Bring money. And bring an escort. Watch out for old men with sharp noses. What? We been invaded. Yes, by little old men with sharp—look, chief, never mind, come out here and I'll tell you the whole thing."

With that he hung up.

At the thought of how Dundon must look, he grew cheerful for the first time since the whole business had begun. For a rising happy moment he began to feel for once like his old gay carefree self.

I am going to wait, he said happily to himself, until the whole damn army gets here.

I am not going to move a foot. I will sleep and eat until the cows come home, I will load up on scotch and I will lock my door, because, by heck, I deserve it.

Because he had had little experience with hotel rooms, especially rooms of such a lavish nature, he did not think of room service. He strode through the door gaily whistling, and was halfway to the elevator when the orange flash cut him down.

Kunklin and Prule joined to rake in

twelve more Faktors, and to dissolve Web once again.

"This is quite hard on the boy, really," Prule observed reproachfully.

Kunklin was unmoved. "He doesn't feel a thing. He will never know about it."

Prule agreed, but he was a sensitive man, and he sighed. And then he said:

"They found him with remarkable celerity, don't you think?"

"Tracing a Galactic—an unequipped Galactic—is not difficult. The wave length, of course."

"Yes, but they had no idea he was coming to this place."

"They certainly did. They expected him at the center of operations—which this town must obviously be—sooner or later. When their men did not return from the desert, or the town, they must have grown apprehensive."

"Well, anyway, we don't need this poor fellow anymore. Why don't we let him go, and mop up ourselves."

Kunklin grinned righteously.

"I'm a great believer in letting these people help themselves," he said. "It seems more sporting that way. He's doing fine so far. I think we ought to leave him in just to see how far he can go. Really, he does deserve to be in at the end."

"I suppose. But you know, we almost didn't finish that last recording in time."

It was a sobering thought.

"We'll have to follow him more closely," Kunklin said, beginning the work of assembly. "But after all, we're very near the end. I expect we will be going home—"

He broke off in mid-sentence as a tall, unusually symmetrical young woman walked leggily around the corner of the hall. Kunklin was invisible behind the warp shield, but although she could not see him he could clearly see her, and his eyebrows rose happily.

"Um," he began, "it begins to come home to me now why this planet is so well-visited. First this Earthman's father, then the Faktors—"

Prule cut him off. Kunklin was a first rate repairman, but he was also a first rate lecher, a trait he had carried to several harrowing extremes on other humanoid worlds, to Prule's almost Quakerian sorrow. Prule

soberly pressed him back to work, to the messy job of assembling Web Hilton from the molecular recording.

And when Kunklin's head was down and busy, Prule's eyes quickly followed the pneumatic young lady as she walked down the carpeted hall.

AND now Web was walking down a street in the black night, walking slowly, without purpose or direction or intelligence. He was aware of walking for quite some while, numbly, vacantly, as if he was rising from a long dark tunnel, before he reached the end and came suddenly alive.

He stopped in the center of the sidewalk.

It had happened again.

Bewildered, he looked around him. There was nothing about the street, about the long low rows of squat black houses, which was familiar. He had no reason of his own to come here; he was not even sure he was still in Chicago.

He put his hand to his forehead and rubbed his eyes. A feeling of great emptiness, of being utterly alone in an impossible world, swept through him. This time his memory went as far as the call to Dundon, no farther. He had begun to walk from the room, and it was as if he had walked off a cliff into nothing, into a cloud, and he had emerged from the other side still walking, only now he was walking on an unknown street. What happened in between was not in his mind. After a moment he did not try to remember, because there was not even an association. In that area his mind was totally empty.

He gathered himself quickly. There was a great drive inside him which all the years up to now had not really touched, but now he was beginning to feel himself move. He was confused. He was alone. But he was also becoming deeply angry. He was going to find out what had happened, was happening, and he would do it if it meant searching to the end of his life.

He walked quickly to the nearest corner.

The street he was on was Wingate Street.

Which was, he recalled instantly, the address of Albert Bosco.

So he had been directed here. The blank in his mind was not amnesia. Someone had guided his movements to Wingate Street,

had picked him up out of the hotel like you pick up a toy train that has gone off the track.

His anger rose.

He would follow that trail, all right, and when he reached the end—

He began to look for the Doctor's house.

It was a high, narrow building near the end of the block. There was no light in any of the windows.

He strode up to the front door without hesitation, forcefully punched the bell.

Lights came on upstairs. Something came clumping down the hall toward the door, opened it.

Bosco was an old, old man in a shining bathrobe. In the light of the hall his alien nose was keen and obvious.

"Emergency," said Web quickly, "are you the Doctor?" He stepped inside the door before the old man, startled, could answer. He stood poised upon a thick carpet, listening for sounds from other parts of the house. The house was silent.

"I am Doctor Bosco," the old man said weakly, nervously, "what is it you want? Who sent you to me?"

"I need your help," Web said. He thought: this one doesn't know me. "Can you come?"

"But . . . but . . . but . . . I do not leave this house. I am not . . . I cannot go out. You will have to find someone else." He reached past Web to open the door again. Web decided to make his move.

THE arm reached by him. He closed his hand upon the wrist.

The alien froze, stared with enormous horror straight up into his eyes. The wrist in Web's grip was remarkably gaunt and brittle. With a quick downward motion he could break it, and both of them knew it.

The old man started to back away, moaned once with a bubbling hum, and collapsed.

Web bent down to look at the man. He wasn't dead, but he was out cold. Scared damn near to death, Web was amused, grinned once very swiftly. If this was a sample, these aliens weren't much.

He picked up the old man, light and wispy as a bundle of leaves, and carried him under one arm into the big living room

which opened off of the hall. He thought better of turning on a light, slumped the old man on a couch and sat down beside him.

A street bulb outside the house threw a white soft glow of light into the room. That was enough to see by for his purposes. He moved over on the couch to a position from which he could see the door. And then, in darkness, he waited.

It was several minutes before the old man moved. Web had time to think, to form a plan. The first thing that moved in Web's mind was a wonder of why in heck the old man should have fainted, and then it occurred to him that this thing here was alien, truly alien, and probably had a science so far beyond ours as to be impossible to comprehend. He would undoubtedly be long-lived. Web thought; could just as well be immortal.

But anyway, no matter what else he was, it was pretty sure that he lived a long while, and death, any death, was a rare thing among his people. Hence the unusual, to an Earthman, fear of dying. It figured, Humans fear dying all right. But a lot of them face it every day as part of their jobs, because life on Earth must be something like a jungle compared to the germ-free, war-free, super-sanitary world of the future. Death to a man like this would be quite a fearful thing.

And so the collapse.

And a weapon for Web.

He smiled in the darkness, cruelly, as the alien stirred. He would find out from this man whatever he wanted to know.

Awake at last, with Web above him like a huge black mountain, the old man nearly fainted again. But he managed to recover slowly, in a state of really pitiful terror. He had known from the beginning that Web was not a Galactic—a Galactic would never have approached in person. The thought helped him to survive. But even then this Earthman was a barbarian, an unaccountable man with no scruples against killing, and Web was perfectly right about the fear of death. The alien talked.

For a while he babbled, but then it began to make sense.

He told about the coming extinction of his race, and the plan for interbreeding

which would save it. He had been on Earth, he said, for several years, choosing specimens for test purposes. The tests had proved positive and the first step of selection was almost completed. He had been stationed as a real doctor with a real practice, so that he would have the opportunity of giving preliminary physical examinations and passing on the names of potentially acceptable candidates. And there were many doctors like him spread all over the world. Since the United States was by far the Earth's healthiest country of any size, most of the selecting had been done right here.

"But what did you do with the men in the satellite?" Web asked, doing his best to follow but fast losing ground.

"How did you know—? And then the alien almost collapsed again. He had heard, undoubtedly, of the one man that had escaped from the satellite. But that had been a Galactic—

"Why did you do that, kill all those men, and how?"

Web shook him, the alien yelped feebly, then babbled it out.

"The satellite was in a very dangerous position. It could see all our intercontinental travel, the ships we have going and coming daily. It would undoubtedly warn the planet of what it saw. But we could not simply destroy it. Blame for that might conceivably be placed on your enemies, and you are such unstable peop—that is—we—there was no need for a general war. We could not risk that, being ourselves just as vulnerable to atomic attack as any life. So we—removed the men on the satellite."

How, dammit, how?"

When he swore the alien jumped.

"Through devices which you—if you do not already know, you cannot be—oh—yes—I will tell, I will tell—" The old man searched desperately for an explanation. "Your body has—every body is held together by electric forces. By million upon millions of tiny electric currents. The atoms of any body are kept in position by a—by an attraction between them. Now, if that attraction is nullified, the atoms will drift apart, disperse. The atoms will no longer exist in any form. That was what happened to the men in the satellite. They were—turned off."

Web sat perfectly still for a long moment. Then he said swiftly, viciously:

"But why didn't it get me?"

The alien writhed on the couch.

"Your blood must be different. We thought you were a Galactic. Your body chemistry is unusual, your—your charge is different."

Once again Web sat in silence, trying to follow that, Galactic and different blood. But he wrenched his mind away. The sun would be up soon and he would have to be out of here quickly. He would need to know where their main base was, then it was the army's turn. Although what could the army do?

He got the location out of the old man. It was surprisingly near to Chicago.

And the time of the first take-off, the first shipment, would be that night.

He rose to leave. Then he turned back to the old man.

He debated it for a moment, but saw nothing else possible. The old man knew who he was and where he was going, and what he knew. He could not leave the old man to warn the others. The old man knew that too, looked up at him and saved him the trouble.

He died just before Web's great hands reached him.

VII

WITHIN the next hour he had a gun, taken from an amiable but unfortunate young cop who had the courtesy to stop and give him a match on a dark back street. He was sincerely sorry for that, knowing what would happen to the cop, but he was also acutely aware that he needed the gun a hell of a lot more than the cop did, even if this was Chicago.

Later on, when the sun was up, he reconsidered. It occurred to him that where he was going noise would be no virtue, not if he was going in alone. So he bought himself a knife—Bowie, with a double edged tip. Anyway, he had been schooled in knives in jump school, and he knew how to use one even better than a wild .45. The thing to do now was get within reach.

A cab took him to the bus terminal. It was a beautiful morning, brisk and clear

and cold, and on the way he picked up three Faktors.

At discreet intervals, they followed him into the terminal. He did not notice them. They ringed him at a distance, following a set plan of destruction, prepared to close in. Since there had been no time for another recording, Kunklin and Prule had no choice. The three Faktors died at once, in their tracks, in separate parts of the waiting room.

It was a short while before the slumping men were noticed and the uproar began. By that time Web was outside boarding a bus, and he went on his way knowing nothing at all of the Faktors, nor of the unfortunate incident that immediately befell the Galactics.

He rode the bus for two hours. As he got nearer and nearer to his destination his resolve began to slip away. He was utterly alone, and these enemies were alien. What in heck could he accomplish?

The bus pulled into a town called Alford just before noon. He stepped down into the quiet street. There were no aliens around, none that he could tell. He decided that there was probably no sense in waiting for the dark. He did not know his way and the layout would be important, so he decided to go up into the hills right away.

It was a long walk. He stayed with the road for about two miles, then cut off abruptly into the woods. The ground became steeper, he began to climb.

He had not gone forty feet before he tripped the first alarm.

THE catastrophe, which neither Kunklin nor Prule had anticipated, occurred as the result of a power failure.

Continued operation of the machine known as the "bender," together with the enormous power drain of the anti-gravity webs they used to float back and forth, had sapped the power of their suits down below danger level. The one last burst which destroyed the three Faktors reduced that power completely.

Both Kunklin and Prule became immediately visible.

They dressed quite a stir.

Dressed as they were in white, satin-like suits, with glass bowl helmets on their heads

and a large back pack sprouting antennae in all directions, they were an instantaneous focus of interest in the bus terminal.

They were greatly annoyed, and also somewhat embarrassed.

"Galactic obscenity," said Kunklin, as a crowd gathered, "I thought you recharged the suits."

"I thought you did," muttered Prule anxiously. "But let's get out of here. Which way is the ship?"

They began to walk forward toward the door and the curious, grinning crowd parted.

"It's way down this wide street. Oh fine!" Kunklin swore gloomily, attempting at the same time to keep his face impassive. Fortunately, Earthmen were humanoid. If they were not, of course, the Galactics would never have allowed this to happen. And if experience on other planets of this culture level was any judge, these people here would think the Galactics and the suits were some kind of stunt. But though this accident had happened quite often to other Galactic agents, it had never happened to them, and they were apprehensive. They eyed the crowd warily as they walked.

Grinning, giggling, pointing, the crowd eyed them back, and followed.

Out into the street they went, two tall, undeniably weird-looking men unable to keep their embarrassment from their faces. One wide-eyed little boy ran up to Prule, grabbed at his sleeve with taffy-smeared fingers. He chirped loudly to his parents to "looka the space men." The mother came up, politely disengaged his fingers, gave a smiling, unintelligible apology to Prule. Prule nodded as graciously as he could, tried to walk faster.

"Listen," Prule groaned, "the power is too low to work the translator. Suppose we're stopped? We can't talk to them."

"Here comes one in a uniform," said Kunklin, beginning to perspire.

"Police?"

"Yes."

"I suggest we run."

They broke into a trot. The crowd around them had grown rapidly and began to trot with them, wondering where the show would take place. The policeman ran too.

They let out their speed. Now a whole

host of people began to shout and new ones joined them, running, as they crossed a main street against a light.

"Faster," grunted Kunklin.

Prule swore. "I can't. The suit's too heavy."

"Just a little way. When we get to the ship we'll put on a demonstration."

They tore down the avenue, narrowly evading children, old ladies, and newsstands. Two more blue-coated officials joined in the chase, converging and blowing whistles. Several more were coming up in front of them when they finally reached the ship.

They stopped in the center of the wide street. Traffic screeched to a halt on all sides.

"Are you sure it's here?"

Kunklin looked around uneasily, then spied the faint hazy circle of the opening, several feet in the air above them. He pushed at his anti-gravity knob, felt himself lightening, but not lifting. He swore.

The crowd was reaching them, small boys and men lurched to a stop around them.

"They're waiting for us to do something," Prule hissed.

"Quick! Before the police get here! Jump!"

Prule looked up helplessly at the hazy circle.

"How"—he began, but Kunklin pushed him aside, assumed a broad stance in the center of the crowd. He thrust his arms outward dramatically, as if for silence. Just then the first cop broke through and into the center of the circle and began to speak virtuously, angrily, in the manner of cops, but the people around him were staring at Kunklin and waiting expectantly.

"Well," said Kunklin, speaking cheerfully in Galactic, "it's been fun." He threw the anti-gravity to full power, waited till he could feel that the lift would no longer increase. It was not enough to get him off the ground, but he now weighed next to nothing. He crouched, then leaped for the haze above. He shot up like a rocket, went through the circle and disappeared.

A moment later Prule followed him. As he sailed up through the haze the ship became immediately visible above, he reached out and caught on to a rung of the ladder below Kunklin. Thankfully, wearily, not bothering to look down at the stunned,

open-mouthed crowd which he could see below him but which could no longer see him, he followed Kunklin up into the ship.

Kunklin did not wait at the airlock, he ran quickly away. Prule, puffing, paused to look down at last on the crowd below. Their ascent had been a success. The crowd was beginning to applaud.

Prule closed the airlock and the invisible, untouchable ship lifted. He went to join Kunklin. The big Galactic was bent over the controls, guiding the ship not upward—as Prule had thought—but horizontally down the length of the wide street.

"Eh?" said Prule.

"Got to get a live Faktor," Kunklin said anxiously, his eyes glued to the viewscreen. "We've lost the Earthman. He could be anywhere now, and we can't help him. He may be headed for the Faktor's main base. If so he will be killed. We've got to get to the base first."

Prule pursed his lips. "If he dies on our account, just because of your foolish idea to use him—"

"I know," Kunklin cut in. "So we need a Faktor to tell us where the base is. They're probably all over this city. I think I even saw one in the crowd." He stopped. "That's another thing," he said unhappily, "if there were Faktors in the crowd, they'll know a Galactic ship is here."

Prule grunted, peered down at the left side of the screen.

"Look, isn't that one?"

He indicated a small, furtive-looking man who was walking swiftly away from the area they had just left.

Kunklin adjusted for a close view.

"Yep." He moved to the instrument panel, worked carefully at a traversing mechanism. "Get down to the airlock. We'll suck him up."

"He'll die of fright," Prule predicted. "They always do."

Kunklin shrugged. "We have to try. Maybe he will be a strong one."

"Let's hope so."

Prule readied himself at the open airlock. Kunklin threw a switch, there was a deep, subtle hum, and a magnetic beam closed down on the man below. He slipped straight up toward the ship, like a hooked minnow.

But he was not one of the stronger Fak-

tors. He was dead before he reached the door.

IN THE late afternoon, when the wind had died and the day was quiet, the door opened.

The same two men—she had begun to be able to tell them apart—came in and, this time, bowed.

Ivy yawned, rose up on an elbow and blinked her eyes.

The two men, surprised, stared at her.

"All right, what is it?" Ivy said as briskly as she could, trying to force down the sudden fear. "Stop that damned bowing. A sillier bunch of skinny idiots I never saw. Men! Huh! You're dying out, all right, that's obvious."

The two men looked at each other. Then one of them recaptured his grin.

"It is time for your breeding," he said lecherously.

Ivy yawned again, started to rise.

"Okay, I'll be with you in a minute. I hope it doesn't take too long. I've lost a lot of sleep."

She managed to stand up calmly, with composure. The only thing she could think of to do now was to regard this whole thing lightly, and to make an occasional remark about the rather obvious defects of her captors.

There was no sense in collapsing.

The two men, puzzled, followed her with their eyes as she fluffed up her hair.

"No need of that," one of them said quickly, "you will be prepared by others."

Ivy let her hair fall. "Okay Oscar. Whatever you say." In a very unladylike manner, she yawned again, scratched herself. She grinned at them both.

"I don't mean to be nasty, fellas, but why don't you pull up a chair for a minute? Old guys like you shouldn't be running around all day—"

The near one growled. The other one restrained him, smiled thinly.

"We have no need of rest," he said slowly. "We possess a certain—vitality." His smile broadened. "As you shall presently see for yourself."

Ivy did not look at him, walked suddenly past him and out the door.

They made a motion to grab her, but

held back as she stopped. She stood in the afternoon sun and stretched lazily.

"To your left," the man behind her said.

She waited for a moment, and then she walked. She strode upon bare ground, upon soft grass, unable to be flippant now, looking stiffly ahead toward a flat gray building. The door was open and she could see the far wall, which was richly hung and colored in a strange deep red. The two men left her at the door, where another man, very old and white gowned and prissy, took her by the arm.

The man prepared her. She dropped all pretense at hardness, at disinterest, and sat like a stone. In with the other, the breeder, she would have to be icy. She became vaguely aware of a thick fragrance around her, a musky, oily smell. Then the man released her. She was prepared. He stood her up, waved at the door at the far end of the room.

"There," he said without interest, turning away.

She took a deep breath and walked forward.

It was a long way up and Web went most of the way at a crouch, the knife and the gun both ready at his belt. He had taken off his coat and tie; it was chilly in the woods but he did not feel it.

Four miles north of Alford, the old man had said. Just a half mile off the highway, on the tallest hill, the really steep one. He kept the highway to his right going up, beginning to wonder at last if the alien had told the truth. For all he knew, the camp might really be in northern Tibet, and he could be stealing his way ever so stealthily through total emptiness. But no. The old man had been scared to death. Literally. And anyway, the thing he was walking into was undoubtedly a trap, and knowing it did not do much good.

He cleared the first rise and climbed in among some rocks. Nearby below he could see the highway, empty. The sun was high in the afternoon. Four miles was not a long way, even crouching, and he could probably make it before dark. In the dark shadows of the bushes around him, nothing moved. He went up the next hill.

When he reached the top he was begin-

ning to perspire. He sat down for a moment to think.

Now that he was close and the moment of contact was so near he could almost touch it, his mind began to function with a cold, comforting clarity. It was time to make a plan. His target was the ship, yes, but he would have to proceed on the assumption that they knew he was coming. They would have some kind of warning system, and a variety of weapons. But for the time being he held the ace.

He grinned cheerlessly to himself and headed for the next rise.

On the other side of this one there was a long flat space, scrub-bushed and empty, and then the last hill, the steep one, began. He went forward across the open space in broad daylight. He felt like he was walking into the mouth of a primed cannon. In effect, he was.

It was in among a clump of pines, silent and green, that the thing fell to the ground near him. He froze, momentarily panic-stricken, his hand to his belt. The fallen thing lay on the ground a few inches from his right hand, stiff and unmoving, dark among the leaves.

He relaxed slightly.

It was only a bird.

A dead bird. He stared at it for a long while, motionless. Out of the trees above him a dead bird had fallen.

Coincidence?

Or were they now turning on the power?

He lay flat on the ground. They knew where he was and they did not like it. They had fired on him. He did not know whether the thing that killed the bird had missed him, or whether it had hit him too and his incredible immunity had protected him. Perhaps they had already fired on him with the other gun, the one from the satellite. He did not know that either. But in front of him lay the dead bird.

And now, if he tripped another electronic eye, they would probably come out in person.

All for the best. He peered intently through the trees up the hill, searching for some sign of buildings. If he could get to the edge of a clearing, could see, he would stand a better chance. But there was nothing but bushes, the bare brown shafts of trees. Now that they knew where he was, he was

deeply thankful that he'd had the sense to bring the gun.

He moved forward on his hands and knees, watching, listening, praying that he didn't trip another eye.

The bushes crackled around him. The wind, dammit.

He stopped and listened, heard his heart beating in his throat. He decided he could crawl just as well with one hand, so he took out the gun. It was at that moment that he saw the first Faktor.

An instant silhouette through the trees ahead, moving silently toward him. They were coming.

HE DROPPED to his stomach, crawled with a cold silent slide into the nearest bush clump. Although they probably knew to the foot where he was, he had to lie still.

In a brief, brutal flash of reproach and disgust, he realized what an idiot he'd been to come out here alone.

But there was no helping that now. He moved down behind a fallen log, laid the barrel of the .45 on the trunk and sighted through the leaves.

Now he could hear them. They were small, but sloppy. Maybe they didn't care. That didn't figure. But by now they had undoubtedly understood his immunity, were coming to kill him in the bloody ways of Earth.

He had no way of knowing that the Faktors had been terrified to realize that a Galactic was approaching, but immensely relieved to see that the Galactic was afoot. To the Faktors, Web was one of two things: a hybrid, or a stranded Galactic. For no agent would ever approach on foot, not in his right mind. Short of a force field, no armor known will stop a high velocity missile. And a Galactic on foot could not have that.

The killing of a Galactic was a rare thing, a delectable thing. Seven Faktors converged on Web.

He let them come in very close, counting them and noting their positions, before he fired. When the nearest man was ten yards away, crawling toward Web at an angle, the white round eyes looked past him. In the last second he saw that they were cir-

cling the wrong spot. They had not expected his sideward movement. He fired.

The heavy police bullet caught the Faktor in the head. He died where he lay, instantly. There were swift, rising, horribly frightened screams from the bushes around him.

Web rolled back from the log, crawled around to the other side of the tree. The god-awful things were whimpering.

He peered furtively around the tree looking for another shot while the shooting was good, wondering how in hell they'd ever gotten the nerve to come in after him. And then he looked at the body of the alien he'd killed, saw the small brown bomb in his hand, and knew.

They'd never intended to get in close. They probably hadn't even expected him to be armed.

He grinned viciously, turning his head the while to look for a way out.

In that instant he saw another alien move. He fired.

The shot went home. There were more screams.

Good God, he said, almost aloud, shocked. He did not fire again, the fear of the things was revolting. He wanted to get out.

He started to move, but they located him. The first bomb hit on the other side of the tree, blew with a white blinding flash, a thin, screaming, ripping explosion.

The tree saved him. He fell flat, tried to crawl away. Two more bombs let go on the other side of the tree, spattered among the bushes and leaves, cut the tree in half. The tree fell in the direction of another bomb, the top of it was blown away. In frantic desperation, the Faktors were giving it everything they had.

There was a tense moment of silence. Web started to rise. He had to get away. He fired again and again into the woods around him, rose and started to run, hoping that the shooting would keep the aliens flat, that some of them at least had died of fear and that he could outrun them. He made it as far as another fallen log before the next bomb let go, giving him a great crunching shove in his back. He fell face down over the log.

Oh hell, he said painfully, oh hell oh hell oh hell. A bomb fell near him, and another, and he turned to rise and fire back

just once more, swearing, his flesh rising to greet the one last killing explosion, and damn it all, he was going to die.

A huge fist hit him squarely between the eyes. He fell over backwards.

And there was dark, blessed silence.

THE doors opened automatically when Prule pushed the right button. Three hundred and twelve young girls and two hundred and fourteen young men, all of them the cream of Earth's children and most of them mother-naked, peered out cautiously, furtively, into the gathering dusk. One made a move, then another. A rather brazen young woman, nude, walked right out into the center of the camp. And then they all emerged, wide-eyed and taut, looking for the Faktors.

"All gone," said Kunklin, waving his hands expressively. But since his suit was recharged and working, nobody saw him.

They did not see the Faktors either. They began to gather and talk with each other, some dangerously close to shock, some excitedly none the worse for wear. Most of the women were recovered so far as to return to modesty, began to search for covering.

This did not please Kunklin at all. He was tempted to push the button again and close all the doors, thereby making all clothing unavailable, but—after a thoughtful look at Prule—he let it go. It had been an extraordinary sight, a delectable sight, and his opinion of the virtues of Earth was skyrocketing.

Right then and there Kunklin decided the spot for his next vacation.

And now at last, as they watched, the men and the girls began to leave. It was growing dark and quite cold and they could not stay here. One by one, in varying degrees of undress, they strode off down the mountain. The sensation they created in Alford was nothing next to the sensation they created the next day, in newspapers the world over.

Kunklin watched them go with mixed torture and delight.

Prule brought him back to the next order of business.

"The Earthman," he said gloomily.

"Um?"

"The man from the satellite. Where is he?"

"Um," said Kunklin, sobering. "Where is he indeed?"

Prule pointed a lean finger at the near woods.

"There were explosions going on over there when we flew down. I suppose—" he fixed his eyes reproachfully on Kunklin—"they bombed him."

Kunklin shrugged. "The man came all the way up here. Really. You know, you have to admire these people, in more ways than one. I—"

He broke off.

For out of the woods, stumbling, holding his head in one hand and his colt .45 in the other, came the great battered figure of Web Hilton. He was scarred and bloody, one eye was closed and he walked with a heavy limp, but he was walking at least, and Kunklin brightened.

"Well by Jupiter, he made it!"

Prule smiled happily.

"We must have just got here in time. The Faktors were probably bombing him when they disappeared."

"Yes, yes. Well, well well." Kunklin fussed with a knob, turned off his bender and switched on the translator. "I suppose, now that it's all over, we owe this fellow an explanation. Lord, man, we owe him more than that. He's one of us!" He started walking quickly toward Web. "Ho! Hey! You there!"

Web stopped, peered confusedly through bleary eyes at the incredible figures on the mountain side before him. His gun was in his hand, but he had forgotten it. He had not yet collected himself and there was an awful ringing in his head.

Kunklin and Prule surrounded him, babbling away cheerfully, set him down and gave him first aid. In an astonishingly short time he was feeling well again and the Galactics did their best to bring him up to date on what had occurred, being careful to praise his undeniable courage in the face of such odds. They admitted to using him as decoy, but told him nothing about the recording business. They saw no reason to tell this boy that he had, during the course of recent events, died twice. No telling how he would react. Although really, since

he was atom for atom identical with the original Web Hilton; what difference did it make?

"—and so we finally found a Faktor with some strength of will—had to inject the man as he came aboard—then came out here and eliminated the rest of them."

Web stared dazedly around at the empty buildings.

"All gone?"

"Completely." Kunklin grinned. "We used the same device on them that they used on your people. We thought it only fitting. Quite a weapon. Used to be the most dangerous weapon in this part of the universe until we found immunity. You could wipe out whole planets without a single leaf being harmed—"

"Yes, yes," said Prule, "but the job is ended. Thank you my friend. You have been of great help. Any time you need us. Kunklin?"

"What?" said Kunklin, straightening. "You mean leave him here? Well really, Prule, that's hardly—" And then his whole face brightened. He clapped Web heavily on the back. "Why Prule, this boy's a Galactic! After all he's done for us, the least we can do is take him back with us"—Prule jumped—"to headquarters, at least, and introduce him around. Why, the boy has a heritage! You can see that from the way he held up his end. Oh yes, yes, we'll have to take him back."

Web looked up blearily, beginning to understand.

"Back where?"

But Kunklin reached down and took him by the arm, and began leading him toward the ship. He explained, as painlessly as he could, the fact of Web's Galactic parentage.

He did not say that it was Web's father—which, for biological reasons, it had to be—but only that some ancestor, somewhere along the line, had been extraterrestrial.

And while Web was downing that, and Prule was protesting, Kunklin spoke gaily on.

"You'll need time, my boy, won't you, before you come along with us? You'll need time, eh?"

"I have to see Dundon—"

"Of course, of course," Kunklin chuckled, "take all the time you want. Take weeks, take months. And in the meantime," he grinned toward Prule, in whom just now a great light was dawning—"in the meantime Prule and I will wander the byroads of your lovely planet. Eh, Prule? A vacation!"

And in a mood of genial lechery—for Earthman, Galactic, Faktor, this one thing is constant—the three men climbed into the ship, and then, the sky.

Ivy Jean Thompson, to complete the story in the coldest of truth, never set eyes on Web Hilton in her life. And if she had, it would have made little difference, for the fact of the matter is that Ivy Jean Thompson had had quite enough of men. Any kind of men. The disappearance of the Faktors had occurred, coincidentally, at the last possible moment for the saving of Ivy's virtue. It was, understandably, an unnerving experience.

She opened her eyes to find nobody there. She left the camp firmly convinced that there should never be anybody there. She retired to a small town in north Jersey where she became a particularly grouchy librarian spinster, the last of all the casualties in the case of the Blood Brother.

THE VIZIGRAPH

(Continued from page 3)

can produce the same effect with a hiki as well as a raccoon coat. . . . Please don't tell me I'm the first to notice or object to it. Likewise, the illo on p. 44 bears me out on this point, also. So let's face it, Herman. This is not a two-dimensional problem so let's solve it tri-dimensionally, huh???

That's it for now, Jack. My list of grievances has petered clean out, however, I'm avidly waiting to tell you about those the next ish will undoubtedly bring. Keep up the Fabulous Fiction and I'll be sold on Planet. . . .

Yours 'til the Planks carry me off,
WARREN F. LINK

FORMULATING FORMAT

1014 N. Tuckahoe Street
Falls Church, Virginia

Dear Jack,

As I gaze at the latest VIZI, I have but one question: WHY is there a two-issue lag in the letters? After all; PS is quarterly.

However, let me lapse into a discussion of another current topic: Format. It seems that most of the steady readers and fen would just as soon that you kept PS as it is. Heavy pulp paper, rough edges, rupture-easer ads, and all. Now I personally don't give a darn what format PLANET appears in. After all, I rarely read the stories. Once in a while the VIZI-GRAPH raves over a story and I go back and read it. I certainly don't buy PS for the art—your paper butches this effectively. I buy PLANET for the VIZI-GRAPH. In these poor days, it's the vogue to drop all features, columns, etc., and present nothing but fiction. I hear FUTURE is dropping its letter column and editorial soon. Many others are following suit. I'm just afraid that if PLANET went digest, it would follow these examples.

But PLANET *does* need a change. Look about you Jack. How many of the old style pulps do you see left on the stands? The pulp has a choice. It can either develop, modernize, improve or die. All too many pulps are dying. The passing of Street & Smith was the beginning of the end. S & S was the king of the pulp publishers, and, I believe, the oldest. In 1949 all but ASTOUNDING had folded. In effect, the king of the pulps had died. But, of course, by this time, S & S was no longer king. Standard probably had the most mags on the market. And where is Standard today? Merely a shadow of itself.

The pulps have mutated into the digest-size mags. Compare the ratio of the two types a year ago, with today. A year ago, I could find up to 75 pulps in one store. Today that store carries only digest mags.

What I'm getting at is, that you've got to put new clothing on PLANET. Already a trend has begun among the remaining pulps to trim edges and use better paper. The pulps are faced with the fact that they must get a new look or perish. And I definitely feel that better paper, for one, would improve PLANET. Why? Look at FUTURE. When it was pulp, the illo had to be crude to reproduce well. A Finlay wouldn't print properly. Now that better paper is being used, a noticeable improvement in art work is evident.

Freas has been compared with Finlay. The objection raised in VIZI is that Finlay depends on a multitude of details. Have these critics ever seen Kelly's work in ASTOUNDING or IF? When such things reproduce well, he proves himself a master of de-

tails. And his art in these mags are worlds apart from what he does in PLANET. He is probably the most promising artist in the sf field today. He's far better than Emsh.

Referring to the immediate VIZI, I notice Don Wegers has won an original. More power to him! This guy is going places in fandom. Give him first prize for thigh. Give Mittelbuscher second place. And Keith King third.

Memo to King: Ever read Clement's ICEWORLD in ASF? This concerns a life-system that exists higher on the temperature scale. I seem to remember a story in the distant past that dwelt with beings who lived in our sun. And Nourse did a couple of stories for ASF concerning the fourth dimension in which experiments were made with "absolute zero."

Actually, as I understand it, heat—or temperature—is motion of molecules. At absolute zero, all motion would stop. All radiation would stop. And if this were so, then matter would cease to exist. At least in this dimension. I fail to see how you could go even lower than this, but it might be possible.

On the other hand, if we're, going to play with paradoxes, I have some dandies. As you know, Einstein says that matter becomes smaller and relative time, longer, as you approach the speed of light. Therefore, while you might be gone for generations on Earth, you might only age a few days on a trip to some star, if your speed was controlled just right. As far as I know, no one's played with this in their stories.

And at the opposite end of it all, what happens when you go slower? Actually, we're moving, all of us; the universe. If we applied this in reverse, however, anything which was at speed zero would cease to exist. But, of course, STATIONARY TO WHAT??? Upon what can we base our speed? If we were going at just under the speed of light, Earth time, we would be going over it at our own time. That is, (rather botched that one up, didn't I?) the speed of light as measured in distance traveled, in seconds, would differ if measured by ship time, since the ship time would be much slower. In effect the ship would be going several times the speed of light, as measured by the ship.

Are you confused????? Think of me!

Onward in VIZI, we come upon a letter by The Dribbler. I must confess that I have some of the same symptoms. . . .

But this Courtois gets my goat. . . . In STARTLING (or was it TWS) he tells off Fandom, as a bunch of cads, bounders, sex-maniacs, and worse. Now he describes What Fandom Means To Me. I suppose you know that he is literally beside himself; being as he signed half of his letters as a mythical sister.

It seems that Val Walker has turned on fandom. Why, Val? I do agree with Val on sex, and I feel as others seem to, that unless someone can contribute something of importance on the subject, that it should be dropped. It seems like every mag must go thru a period of this.

Back to Courtois: While you may feel that MADGE is lily white in its unspoiled innocence, I suggest you read some of the slightly risqué Toffee stories. One thing can be said for Hamling: He makes with the long replies in the letter section. That's one of the things that grates me with PLANET, Jack, your replies if any, are always too short. In looking over what few old PLANES I have, I notice this seems to be the policy. Come on, Jack, make it more of a two-way deal!

Yours for the new look,
TED E. WHITE

THE PERFECT WEAPON

2444 Valley St.
Berkeley 2, Calif.

Dear Jack

Now that PLANET is once more a quarterly, and I'll be forced to wait four months between issues, I feel that the Depression is over. Actually, things can't go much lower. Old timers say that this is just the beginning, but I disagree. After all, people are still buying magazines . . . why not sf mags? The detective and love pulps seem to be going all right, and the westerns never slide downhill.

I see a leveling off in the future, and perhaps, as you say, PLANET will go monthly. Personally, I'd be satisfied with a return to bi-monthly and the missing pages tacked back on once more. I can't visualize a monthly PLANET. It's almost as hard to see as a digest-size PLANET, although the former would be much more pleasing to me than the latter.

THE DAWN OF THE DEMI-GODS was about the best thing in the Summer offering. In fact, it's about the best novel in PLANET since EVIL OUT OF ONZAR in the Sept. '52 issue. This, of course, is just my opinion, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

THE LAST MONSTER was the best short. McKimney is selling quite a number of stories to the mag now. Besides his appearances in one of your digest-size competitors, he's only been seen in PLANET to the best of my knowledge.

Jack, why does Vestal sign some art work "Sam" like he did on the illo for THE AMBASSADORS OF FLESH? Is this just his brush-name, or is he called Herman Sam Vestal around the old offices. I could see a mile away that it was Vestal's work, but it just made me a bit curious. What with Emshwiller calling himself Emsh, Willer and a host of others, I don't know what's going on. Gads, but some of these pros are shady characters.

If the case of John Courtois wasn't so pathetic, I'd probably launch into a brilliant lecture on the subject. But when this guy, who even admits he's not a fan, can see fit to call 100 per cent of fandom either faeries or dumb bunnies, something must be done. I take it for granted that Courtois hasn't seen any of the good things to have come out of fandom. Bradbury, Lowndes, Palmer, and many others were once members of fandom. Magazines like *SF Advertiser*, *Sky Hook*, *Grue* and others have come of "the swamp-land". I think that Courtois should take a little time and energy to find out what's it's all about before he casts a bad light on fandom. Personally, I think he should drop dead. Either that or bust his record of "A Star Fell on Alabama". . .

Best letters this time were the offerings of Jean Mackintosh, A. Keith King and Carol McKinney, in that order.

Burt Beerman thinks you should trim your edges. I can't go along with Burt there, because of one of the other pulps on the stands. It has trimmed edges and 90-odd pages, and looks like the devil. Just keep PLANET the way it is. Trimmed edges would cost more and wouldn't be worth it, in my opinion. Besides, walking home from the newsstands on dark nights is very dangerous, what with robbers and such hanging around. With the sharp edges that PLANET features, any crook could be routed by simply wielding the mag like a knife.

Quarterly,

DON WEGARS

life (particularly in the same magazine) they just naturally hunt around for a name-screen.

NO HARMONY

427 E. 8th St.
Mt. Carmel, Ill.

Dear Jack,

I've been reading PLANET STORIES for nigh onto ten years and I must say that it is milder, much milder. I don't believe I have ever written you a letter in all that time. Few magazines are lucky enough to make that statement.

I have sat through Edwin Sigler's sickening stupidity, mainly because it was such obvious stupidity that I thought most people would recognize it for what it was. But now in the Summer PS comes along a well-known and respected fan, Joe Keogh, with what I at least hope is a *carelessly* stupid remark that undoubtedly many people would like to accept. I quote: "As long as man is Christian, he will remain essentially the same; and when he isn't, he will no longer be man."

This remark is loaded with unhealthy prejudice, which I suppose most people will think is acceptable because they are Christians and Christianity is the "accepted" religion. Personally, I have many friends who are Jewish and I don't take at all kindly to the suggestion that they are some kind of sub-human beasts.

Well, Isaac Asimov has been alleged by some to eat like a pig, and Hal Shapiro drinks like a fish, but aside from that, I resent it. I further suppose that there are many fine people who are Buddhists, Mohammedans, and even Devil Worshipers. I myself am an agnostic and I don't send little children into epilepsy or go on an orgy of ax murders over the weekend.

If humans have to be Christians to be human, then the human race is pretty small. I don't have the exact figures at hand but I think the entire amount of Christians since the time of Christ is less than one fourth of the present population of the world.

Even if Christian was a synonym for human, it wouldn't mean that man would remain the same, because Christianity doesn't remain the same. During the middle ages, the Church, at least passively, accepted sex relations outside of marriage with one or more mistresses. It was a perfectly respectable position to be a kept woman. The situation has changed some today. There are probably more mistresses than ever, but it isn't a socially accepted situation—too many women's clubs probably. Then, too, back there, money-lending (at rates of interest) was a terrible sin. I feel the same way myself when I have to make a monthly payment, but at least today loan sharks aren't driven from the church with whips. Altho the RSV of the bible plays the scene down and even tries to change its moral for modern consumption, Jesus did very definitely condemn all money-lenders to Hell.

I don't suppose PS is the place to argue that the constant references of Jesus' "love of men" didn't exactly mean a love of the human race but something else.

While I'm writing, I may as well say something on James Lewis' letter. "Change PLANET!" he blasphemes in the faces of O'Sullivan and Reiss. This will never do. Why should you fellows evolve into a competitor of GALAXY. Gold has enough of them already, and most of the competitors are falling flat on their circulations because he is so much better at adult sf than they are. I doubt that

ED'S NOTE: I suppose it is much the same with artists as with writers; when they become too pro-

PLANET can afford the rates the so-called "adult" sf magazines do. If it changes policy and not format it will be under another handicap.

As it is, PLANET actually competes with no other magazine because there is only one PLANET. New plots, Lewis asks for. Listen, you start putting in any of those new fangled things and I'll stop buying PS. I expect to read the same stories every issue. Change them and PS wouldn't be the same. Who is writing the story about the criminal and the girl and the villain who are searching for the hidden secret that will make them live happily forever (all except the villain who naturally gets killed) next issue? Get Brackett to do it. I think her fourth from the last try was the best. Get one like that again. Change PLANET indeed! Never!

In this world of uncertainty it's good to have something you can rely upon to be as wonderfully crummy as ever.

I didn't read DAWN OF THE DEMI-GODS. I've been watching it on television for the last several weeks. And was it ever one—no, strike that, Mr. Chairman.

Yours,

Jim Harmon

THE RESURRECTION

Route 1

Mexico, New York

Dear Editor,

Recently I paid a few small fortunes for some early sfzines. And the ones I've paid the most for are some Clayton ASTOUNDINGS. Now at this time ASF (then AS) had only two competitors—the Sloane AMAZING & the Gernsback WONDER. I believe that most people familiar with these will admit that both these mags printed better stuff than ASTOUNDING.

However, the ASTOUNDINGS cost more. What this is all leading up to is this—those old ASTOUNDINGS are almost exactly like the current PLANET.

Harry Bates confined himself almost entirely to an occasional comment on a letter just like you do; the letter writers were almost the same (about the only difference was that when you saw one fan, then another, you had seen two fans and not fen); the covers were almost the same (for instance, take a look at the Sept. '32 cover—can't you see it on PLANET with perhaps a femme added to dress it up a bit); and the stories were mostly space opera. Wonder what will bring the highest price 20 years from now, GALAXY or PLANET?

Speaking of space opera, why don't you have one of your writers do it the way it was done back in those dark dim days?

I mean even the most loyal fan of Edward Elmer Smith will have to admit that Kim Kinnison, the Skylark trilogy and The Spacehounds of IPC are somewhat dated now. Even I an unshakable fan of John Wood Campbell, Jr., Alfred Elton van Vogt and Ray Cummings (incidentally can any fan tell me if a report that Cummings was (is?) Campbell was true?) have to admit that The Impossible Planet, The Mightiest Machine, Brigands of the Moon, Wandl, the Invader, Slan!, The Seesaw, The Weapon Shop, The Weapon Makers, The Weapon Shops of Isher, and more are somewhat dated.

But the titles themselves convey a feeling of adventure which modern SF doesn't even come close to. I know that now a story has to have as much affect on the world as The Bible, The Koran and Das Kapital all rolled into one to even be considered

for publication. But why? Let's admit it, SF isn't going to remake the world no matter how much we may want it to. It used to be that a writer almost made you hold your breath when you read a story. Traveling faster than light used to be something but now the hero blithely flips the ship 102x109657432 light years without batting an eyelash and at the same time carrying on a conversation on the merits of his unlikely, foolish political theories.

Oh well, as Ray Palmer occasionally says at the end of his editorials, nobody will listen so I might as well shut up.

I have found a few stories that still keep the sense of wonder in some English mags and pocketbooks and your own 2CS-AB. The latter, however, has, I believe, folded. My only comment on this is. It's a damn shame. Won't you please try to talk Scott or Reiss or whoever decides such things, into issuing it annually? If you hadn't gone quarterly I would have asked you to have serials, but although I don't mind such a long wait (I save 'em and read 'em all at once) I realize that they are now out of the question.

I believe that your best authors are probably Eric Frank Russell, Bryan Berry, Paul Anderson and Ray Gallun. Is it coincidence that two of these are British?

Bryan Berry is very good but is hardly a new writer as you claimed last year. As a matter of fact he has written at least six books: And the Stars Remain, Dread Visitor, From What Far Star, Born In Captivity, The Venom-Seekers and Return To Earth.

Take for instance his World Held Captive in 2CS-AB, Spring '34. It is a typical Bradbury story but it is much better than Ray Douglass Bradbury could have written it. Firstly, it contains none of Bradbury's constant scientific errors, and secondly, it doesn't blame the nuclear physicists, the atheists, the Christians or the guy that invented the wheel, for the state of the world, and lastly, it contains none of RDB's constant pessimism.

Sincerely,

John F. Schenck

ED'S NOTE: I'll take up your idea for an annual 2 CS-AB with Mr. Reiss; perhaps we can swing it.

GRANDMA GETS TICKLED

2824 W. 59th

Seattle 7, Washington

Dear Sir,

I am a newcomer to Science-Fiction.

The first time I started reading a S-F magazine I was filled with narrow-minded ideas about bothering with such "trash," etc., etc. but when I finished the May PLANET I became a fan.

THE LOST TRIBES OF VENUS won me over.

The story amazed me from a technical viewpoint and the ending tickled my funny bone. Yes, I still have one in spite of being a sixty-year-old grandmother. Did I say old, I meant young.

The illustration on the May number was beautiful. Is there some way I could get one free of the printing? Will gladly pay what it costs.

Just bought the summer number of PLANET and read the DAWN OF THE DEMI-GODS and found it fascinating.

I noticed that most of your fan mail is from the youngsters. Don't tell me that the older ones are not interested too, or am I a freak or something??

How does one go about finding out if there are any S-F fan clubs in one's home town? I would

love to attend some meetings and listen to the different opinions of others?

Inclosed is a dollar for a year's subscription for your very interesting magazine.

Wishing you the best of luck in every way I remain,

Sincerely yours,

Mrs. Esther C. Richardson

ED'S NOTE: Welcome to the PLANET tribe, Mrs. R, and I only wish I could help you in your request for a cover illustration, but alas, that is beyond my powers.

LA BRACKETT

63 Glenridge Ave.,
St. Catharines, Ont.

Dear Jack,

Re the Summish, allow me this: that (chuckle) bem on Kelly Freas' maiden-market cover was the best revelation of alien character I've ever seen on an s-f cover. What did I tell you about the boy? You can now rightfully add him to the list of PLANET discoveries, can you not? For besides gracing PLANET'S cover, I see him on ASF (though it seems to see the ups and downs of cover art almost as much as other mags with less popularity) . . . true, he does perhaps have to give his work a more finished touch, but it is the same old Freas (cheers from the second wastebasket).

Referring back to the May ish, I see that a few unwary fen did fall into the trap I set. I also liked the cover of that one quite well; the border was a well liked novelty, although even there I s'pose someone will complain that it "just isn't like PLANET."

I'm glad to see that a statement of mine has finally caused a minor twist. Vizi hasn't had one in a good many moons. However, either Jean hasn't been reading Leigh Brackett's latest efforts, or has and is one of the "blind worshippers" of friend Mittelbuscher's letter. Yet somehow I feel her letter will be first or second in the race for My Favorite Artist.

Dwelling upon the subject still further (and I have nothing against Jean personally) it seems to me, with my impartial glasses on, that the greater part of her letter was spent indulging in Brackett-like descriptive wrenchings. And, I might add, a bit of paraphrase from Shelley. We'll let the poet worry about his own affairs, but it seems to me that here is another characteristic letter of literary jewelry calculated to set all Brackett-lovers' emotions on fire, and their hearts in pained pleasure for their priestess, whom they will next beg on bended knee before the incense-burner to descend from her throne of starry infinitude and purple gleam to smite yours truly with a thunderbolt, for daring even to suppose that any of her former radiance has dwindled, etc. etc. etc.

Now, Jean, you missed the main purpose of that paragraph of mine. I was not casting aspersions on Brackett's older writings, one of the first stories that lured me into the field was a Brackett . . . but the description in your letter approached fantasy more than science-fiction. It is unfair to say that Brackett was nothing but a fantasy writer, but it is not harming her one bit to say that along with many of Kuttner's pieces, she is in the science-fantasy group. I can appreciate and do appreciate both, but will not tolerate the invasion of our own virgin field by science-fantasy. No

I do appreciate the fact that Leigh has written classics . . . in that field. I also appreciate the fact

that as of late there have been none forthcoming, and am not the type to lapse into deep bowing "at the sound of that magic name" which calls back memories (as Norm Clarke put it in FIE) of the silent purple of silent skies over silent deserts of silent red sands and their silent, silent cities.

Even more I am content in the fact she tactfully handled her missive without the loathsome repetitions some poor ones (I'd call them souls, but for one self-evident reason) produce ad nauseam.—And as for letters: (1) A. Keith King for some interesting probabilities (2) Carol McKinney (3) Jean Mackintosh. By the way, John Courtois, I see, has come up with a trick every neoletterhack comes to, the I-doncare-whether-you-coward-print-this-letter-or-not (oh, no) . . . but nevertheless addresses personally almost fifty per cent of the March ish letter writers. Nous savons, Jean.

Jack, now that PS has gone quarterly, how about the magazine showing on the contents page the date it hits the newsstands? And what became of those little "post-litteras" editorial squibs of glee which explode like cannon crackers?

Joe Keogh

ED'S NOTE: Maybe this new Brackett novel will set off a brand new series of explosions, Joe. Who knows? The on-sale dates now stand like this: the first of June, September, December and March.

RE THE PETULANCE PARADE

74 Willow St.
Glen Ridge, N. J.

Dear Editor,

What, I wonder, could have prompted you to print John Courtois' unusually childish letter? His "I don't give a damn if you print this or not. In fact I doubt that you have the guts to print it" line is one of the most laughable, pitiful, transparent pleas I can imagine.

Poor John. He tries terribly hard to be aloof.

John, of course, doesn't like sex. Nevertheless, it is obvious that he really wants to see nudes on PLANET.

PLANET's illustrations make John sick. It seems that John is made sick by a great many things . . . about PLANET and otherwise. Nevertheless, we may judge from his remarks that he buys the mag consistently.

Perhaps the third paragraph in his verbose parade of petulance is the most revealing. If "Ron is only six years old," John must be pre-natal.

In the fourth paragraph John lets it be known that he hasn't read any of the fiction in the issue. Yet he began with an insult which applied to the magazine as a whole. But I suppose John can only look at the pictures and reads the letters through sheer force of will and parental aid.

John states twice that he is not a fan. While fandom can be proud of his absence from its membership, what, I ask, is he? He reads science fiction—excuse me, he buys it, and he writes letters of a sort.

I imagine that I am one of the minority who is too "damn dumb" to realize that "Organized Fandom is made up of happy little fairies anxious to send and receive gay photos." I am not a member of a fan club, but I have attended some conventions, have had two letters in ASTOUNDING and therefore am on a great many mailing lists, but never, never have I been contacted by anyone interested in exchanging gay photos with me.

Next we find John asserting that TOPS IN SF

"is one of the top sf slicks." This completely reveals John's stupidity. One is made painfully aware of his pitiable condition when he says, "Freas has a tremendous painting."

Next, John defends comics.

John closes his devastating tour de force by insulting Ellik. I suppose that he forgot that he wrote, "Don't be so harsh on Ellik." That, after all, was two whole paragraphs back.

Please, no more letters like Courtois'. Intelligent criticism, by all means, whether constructive or of the more interesting type; but please, please, no more juvenile insulting from sulking carpers.

Now Shrewsbury. "Count one vote for the group-marriage, or clan-type thing. Everyone has various interests and different moods, and it takes more than one person to satisfy the varied demands." My dear Maril, that is very true. That is why we have contacts with various persons, and why we have friends. But why would some hopelessly confuse life by attempting to marry all their friends, damn it? Isn't society confused as it is? If you think the physical side of group-marriage might get a little confusing, think of the legal aspects. Free Love, now, is the thing.

Finally, Goode. "Then we have the self-styled experts. My only comment on them is, 'If you are so D— smart, why ain't you rich?'" I feel that this belligerent remark is rather insulting to all us self-styled experts. Of course I'm damned smart, Mr. Goode. I ain't rich solely because society is too backward to truly appreciate and reward my talents.

By the way, PLANET is a pretty good, quite interesting, and even attractive magazine.

Sincerely,

Richard Hodgins

FEN-SEN

1006 Clermont St.
Antigo, Wisconsin

Dear Jack,

The last thing I had in mind was to start a civil war, but since it's started I shall prepare to defend myself.

First of all, just because a bunch of mentally retarded people decide fen is the plural of fan does not make it a fact. I took the trouble to look up fen; the plural of fan is fans.

I will try to explain once more why I don't like screwball letters. For years I have tried to convince my skeptical friends that really smart, clever and well educated people read science-fiction. Then they pick up one of my magazines and turn to the letter section, then turn to me with a smug smile and I can almost hear the wheels clicking away in their heads.

"Poor girl, I wonder if she was born that way?"

I would like to thank J. T. Goode for those kind words in my favor, but I'm afraid he will receive some nasty blows in return. Our side of this hassle is sadly understaffed so far unless we recruit some new members.

As for Maril Shrewsbury, I'd like to know to what claim he or she has on being a fan and what right to say I am not a fan.

As for Miss Carol (ulcer) McKinney, I do not want to understand slang. As I explained before I'm trying very hard not to be considered a crackpot. I read all letter columns just to get a few laughs, if nothing else.

The most important point I would like to make clear however is that I do not have two heads. One is plenty, especially if you are headed for the block.

One thing the last issue of PLANET gave me was lots of material for my scrap book. It's surprising how many low-minded people enjoy reading those nasty things about me in print. No more long dull evenings now.

I enjoyed the stories very much in PLANET. I'm sorry I can't criticize them. I wouldn't know how; not being an expert. So I shall sign off and get to my battle station.

Sincerely,

Hazel Irene Stamper

ROOT OF THE QUESTION

804 N. Walnut
Hutchinson, Kansas

Dear Ed,

I won't even bother you by telling you how sorry I am that you're going quarterly. You probably have a mountain of letters yelling about that already. The one thing that was funny about it was when Don Wegas told about how "Good ole PLANET" has been trudging the straight and parrow path, right after you had announced that you were going quarterly.

Tom-tom grape vine has it that DAWN OF THE DEMI-GODS was not quite book-length. Somebody's cheatin'. It was the best story of the ish, tho. Second best was THE LAST MONSTER, and third was THE OGRE TEST.

What a Freas cover! What a babe! What a real babe! Yumm! Oh yeah, the rest of the cover was all right, too.

I've been following Woody's art for some time now in the E. C. mags, and I really like it. Have more of his work in your mag. Better still, have him do a cover.

If Courtois doesn't like PS why does he take the time to read it and write such crummy letters? I doubt if he'd be a very good fan anyway even if they were nice enough to give him the title.

Give the following illos. 1) A. Keith King, 2) Jean MacKintosh, 3) Don Wegas.

About the Venus controversy. I think (really) that it would be entirely possible for plants to develop there as intelligent beings. After all, they do breathe carbon dioxide. To go even farther, they could have transferable roots. That is, they could remove their roots from the ground and transplant them when they were through galloping around the country. Now that I am essentially drunk with the power of imagination I will say that they do not even have roots. Another thing, they are carnivorous. One more. They have a plant equivalent of a brain, and not the man type (or if you prefer mammalian or animal type) which they use for their intelligence.

A two-headed fen,

Dwayne Thorpe

HORSE-HOG

9428 Hobart St.
Dallas 18,
Texas

Dear Jack,

If that dope on the cover doesn't up his bid to at least a quarter I'll enclose four bits in this letter. And what about that guy holding up the garb??? In this day and age, I'd expect (and hope for) at least a transparent covering. But I can see that is hopeless. . . . Still, . . .

By the way, this "Star Drenched Sex" must go!!! After the darn newstand keeper kicked me out for looking through every sf mag he's got, I had

a copy of PLANET clutched in my grimy paw. The only thing I shelled out my twenty five pieces of cent for were: THE VIZIGRAPH, and Wally Wood's art. If you are lucky enough to get this superb artist to scribble for you, why don't you at least put his work where it belongs? No less than the cover.

Incidentally, what did you do to the LAKE HIGHLAND drugstore? They won't carry PLANET for the life of them. The more I ask them to, the more determined they are to see you starve. . . . They must have some kind of grudge? Well since you're only a quarterly, I guess I can get downtown at least four times a year!

Well, anyway, I'll say this: John Courtois is the one who is six years old. For a person who hates PLANET with all his soul, he seems to be buying it regularly enough! I don't see how he can compare EC to PLANET, or any other sf mag. Sure, EC is tops in the COMIC field, but he'll have a hell of a time comparing EC's illustrated space cramped sf to PLANET's literate stuff. That's like taking a 1st prize horse, and a 1st prize hog, and asking some innocent bystander at the point of a gun which is best. . . . Great Gha! What some dopes won't do to get their letters printed!

Now down to business: DAWN OF THE DEMIGODS was fair, MARY ANONYMOUS was awright, THE OGRE TEST was so-so, THE LAST MONSTER will do, COLOR BLIND was lousy, THE AMBASSADORS OF FLESH was the same.

Well. . . . Weren't you lucky to get all that WONDERFUL constructive criticism in the above paragraph. . . . I'll expect a life subscription and fifty dollars.

The best letters were: Don Wegars, Carol McKinney and Joe Keogh.

HARK

Mike May

NINE AND OUT!

18 N. 7th St.,
Wilmington, N. C.

Memo: To The Vizigraph, PLANET.

From: A happy fan (I think).

Re: Converse and Controversy.

Item 1. We want PLANET monthly. It is too long between issues.

Item 2. How 'bout a hard edition of the best from the best mag in the field. Suggested title PLANET BOUND. I think that would cover nicely.

Item 3. Sex is here to stay. Why try to hide the fact. Where would we be if it had been removed. Of course it should be presented in good taste, and away from the pornographic level.

Item 4. Current religious and political problems should be left out of your stories. They both have a very special place and should never be ignored, but who wants them in PLANET.

Item 5. Science-Fiction and Jazz artists are a lot alike. Both express their own feelings and emotions and not those set down by certain so called experts who passed out-of-date many years ago.

Item 6. Jazz and STF could exist only in a FREE democracy. Where the exponents of both fields don't have to follow the dictates of classical demi-gods whose words and music must be adhered to in the smallest sense; but can follow their own ideas to the logical

ends. In fact, where would they be if they couldn't write or play as they feel. In a slave society such as the Reds advocate, that's where.

Item 7. That most STF fans have one or more hobbies other than collecting and participating in Science-Fiction. And that a man with hobbies is a better and more balanced man. He is happy because there is always something to do and he does not have to give into boredom. If parents would give their children an interest in a hobby there would be much less crime.

Item 8. Somebody is going to disagree on one or more of the above. Hope they do, as America has grown great on such differences, and the right to express them.

Item 9. The last cover was GONE. Why, oh why, did the funny dealer have to get in front of the merchandise. Man, some merchandise, they should have a supply in every local department store. Oh yes, the inside of the mag was good (as always). You don't have to change PLANET for me. Is the best on the stands now, and the only one I buy every ish.

So long,

Bill Deppe

JUST AS YOU ARE

Oakland 21, Calif.

Dear Editor,

Just a few lines of comment on the Summer issue of PLANET. Every story was exceptional and in its own realm.

Another good point is that your stories have hardly any fantasy. A little bit is alright but do not go overboard as so many other sf magazines tend to do.

Your announcement of reducing PLANET to four per year is hard to take but if it means top-ranking stories, I'm all for it.

So for now, happy blastoffs,

N. C. Brandt

SHOCK-WRITER

750 Lake Drive, S.E.

Grand Rapids, Michigan

Dear Editor,

I note that you are now on quarterly status. It doesn't surprise me, as it merely means that several hundred other people like myself have found out that your magazine is not worth paying a quarter for each time.

In my case, it is the so-so stories, lack of intelligent editorials and most of all, The Vizigraph. Not too much La Vizi, but that it is printed at all. Practically all the letters sound as though the writer had left the Electromatic Typewriter running while they went to lunch, then when they returned they looked at the length, said, "I guess that'll be enough words for this time," signed it, sent it to you and then you printed it.

For example, look at the ignorant provincialism shown in the last sentence of Joe Keogh's letter in La Vizigraph in the summer issue of PS. . . . "As long as man is Christian, he will remain essentially the same; and when he isn't, he will no longer be man." Joe Keogh is certainly unacquainted with the ideas that John W. Campbell, Jr., expresses in his editorial in the July ASF. Nor is he familiar with the ideas expressed by the Balin's, that all advancing

sociological civilization is based upon Progressive Religious Revelation, and etc.

Yes, I can understand why you don't print intelligent editorials. What would the La Vizi flutter-brains be able to make of them? NOTHING!!! And, for a guess, that's why you print so many idealess stories.

Sincerely,

(Mrs.) Cecil Dennis

MAN CLOSE TO VENUS

1517 Penny Dr.
Elizabeth City, N. C.

Dear Jack,

At last you have the good choice of publishing a letter from someone who I cannot include among the normal imbeciles who write to you. Not that I dislike them, or your choices, just that it gets so boring listening to a bunch of pseudo-critics grabble over which author is good, which story was lousy, etc.

I come to take issue with A. Keith King. First off, don't delude yourself as to the fact that fen are mental giants. . . . I've found that out the hard way. Next, he seems to assume that only Carbon, Silicon can work in making a living thing. He adds oxygen as a matter of course . . . add chlorine, and if you want to stretch a point, flourine. He also seems to think that being that Venus has a heavily clouded atmosphere, and therefore is composed of mostly CO₂ (the atmosphere, I mean). Sight observation means nothing, my dear gentleman, in determining the composition of anything. Only chemical analysis, or a spectrograph, can supply the correct determination of an unknown.

Chemical analysis of Venus' atmosphere is impossible at this time, so only the spectrograph is left. The spectrograph, sir, is even better than chemical analysis anyway. I've seen spectrofilms of Venus' air, and the only thing that is vitally stressed is CO₂. There is a large portion of formaldehyde also present, but not much in comparison to the CO₂. Regardless of how much CO₂ is present, it is a very heavy gas, much heavier than normal atmospheric gases. It stands to reason that this gas would sink to the ground (if there is such), unless either of the two following things existed: (1) the atmosphere is composed entirely of CO₂, or (2) extreme high air currents hold the gas in suspension. If life existed, it would throw off oxygen (a poisonous gas to it), most probably into the atmosphere (as it is the most convenient). Providing your theory of life were true, by this time, much free oxygen should be in Venus' air. Oxygen is much lighter than CO₂, so it would come to the top of that mass of CO₂. Even a trace of oxygen present would show on the spectrograph . . . none has.

The spectrograph does not probe into atmosphere! It merely breaks up the light, so as to show the various elements present. To penetrate atmosphere, you must photograph the planet using infra-red light. Infra-red has the best penetrating ability of any of the light spectra. We get only a short distance, even using infra-red light, showing nothing at all. Sometimes we get glimpses of black spaces in the clouds, indicating tremendous mountain ranges, or a terrific surface action throwing up tons of surface tundra. Thus far we get more indication of great atmospheric action.

Now, as to that formaldehyde-plastic idea. There is only one thing wrong with this idea . . . no, two . . . first off, we have the spectra of formaldehyde alone, no compounds of it . . . second, we find no

water vapor present, so you could hardly find the formaldehyde-plastic there. Also, no matter how much oxygen, carbon, etc. is present, it is in compound form.

Earth's atmospheric spectra would show a very strong line of Nitrogen, but also one of oxygen about half as strong, and then smaller and smaller lines of other gases.

I miss the logic of your statement about air absorbing all spectra above the red. The only thing absorbed in great quantities is blue or ultra-violet. The others, green, yellow, orange, red, etc. pass through, in lesser or greater amounts. However, they *do* pass through, and the amount absorbed is negligible. Also, even though a great amount of blue is absorbed, not too much less passes right on down to the earth. The earth would not appear reddish, sir, but rather on the blue-green (due to the tremendous amount of water and vegetable covered matter), with a tint of yellow-orange over the land areas. Color depends on the spectra reflected, not on the kind of light projected on it. A blue object appears blue because it reflects blue light, and absorbs most others, especially red. The earth absorbs most of the red light striking the surface, but some is reflected, giving for that yellow-orange I mentioned.

In an eclipse of the moon, you think the red light shows what the earth reflects, hmmm? Again, you are slightly wrong. Only a small amount of reflected light (from the surface) goes on to the moon. The red color is caused by a lot of trash in the air which absorbs most of the other colors, and lets only reddish light pass. It (red light) is bent by refraction, and the result is that the red light is literally sprayed on the moon, making it appear red. It has nothing to do with what the earth's color is. If you could get close enough to Venus you would see that the same thing happens, but in a much lesser amount.

Now you suggest that Mars looks red because it's atmosphere only passes red light to the surface. In the first place, Mars would have to be quite predominantly red in order to reflect that light! If it were not red, the light would have been absorbed. . . . Next, we find that on Mars, red light does not penetrate very far. In any series of photos of Mars you'll find that the ones taken by the blue-light spectra shows the surface, while the red-light spectra shows dust clouds *above* the surface. By normal process it should be the exact reverse. This might indicate that: (1) something is wrong with every spectrograph that ever was used in photographing Mars (2) the planet is predominantly red in color (3) the clouds are not clouds at all. No. 2 is right, and No. 3 is partly right. It's still a mystery, but I hope something good comes of the recent approach of Mars, in that it might be cleared up. I shall let you speculate.

The only thing I'll say about your retrograde satellites is that: their retrogradeness is not measured by their attitude to us, but to the planet. Get that, they are retrograde to the *planet*. If the planet's attitude to the ecliptic makes it appear retrograde, so? What matters is that the darn things are retrograde to *both* the planet and everything else in the ecliptic that we call a satellite. What matter if the planet is on its side? That satellite is still retrograde, and you can't deny that.

If Jack has had the bad taste to publish this, and you happen to be reading it, I'd appreciate some sort of answer . . . you can take this as a challenge if you want, but I prefer to think of it as mere passing thoughts.

I won't comment on the stories, as I never bother to read them anyway. . . .

To goodie: If you don't want to read abbreviations, why in hell's name don't you stop reading the letter column and wasting your "valuable" time? To make a double quote: "If you're so D— smart, why ain't you rich?"

Give those illos to (1) King (because he spoke out), (2) Wegars (for a darned good letter), and (3) Mackintosh (whn has a poetic flair).

Thanks much for listening to me, Jack, and expect more letters if you keep on putting out a good mag. I's forever!

I Dissolve,

Samuel Johnson

STAR-SEARCHER

Littlejohn Lane,
Cooksville, Ontario

Dear Jack,

Well here I am, back again. This time I have got the brilliant editorial idea I spoke about in the last ish.

The whole essence of science-fiction is that someday, probably soon, mankind will be able to spread out to the stars. Most stories picture mankind as soon becoming ruler over other races that are scattered through the stars, either by an interstellar war or other means. But nobody seems to have considered the fact that mankind may be in fact very unimportant.

Not many people have considered the idea that all planets are literally teeming with life. Maybe on every planet there is some form of intelligent life. In fact there is reason to believe that there are two other intelligent forms of life on this planet alone, although one hasn't the proper type of hands, and the other the human race says in its egotism, operates along instinctive lines.

A porpoise has a brain the size of a man's but has only fins so that it would be very hard for it to develop a technology. The ant has tribal wars, domesticated animals and many other things that show a fairly high civilization. How on earth could a high civilization be built along instinctive grounds?

Yours fannishly,

Morgan Harris

LAST FLIGHT

318 East Commercial Street,
Appleton, Wisconsin

Dear John (this is a Dear John letter),

So I enjoy the way my name looks in print. Crime? But then, I enjoy all sorts of worthless things. I even enjoy PLANET. Well, you printed my first letter and now everyone will think I'm crazy. If you print my pseudological one, they'll know I'm crazy. So here I am a third time, to clear up any lingering doubts.

MARY ANONYMOUS is not only a trite and molly idea, it is a very bad story. It is, in fact, the worst story I have ever read in PS; perhaps the worst story I have ever read. I'll lay you ten to one that it was rejected by Brevzine before Walton stuck you with it.

The rest are nothing yarns, but readable, except for COLOR BLIND which brought forth a tee-hee from my sullen lips. I'm talking about the shorts, you understand. Longies are something else, especially on warm days when they start to itch. Ray Gallun is very good. However, that is not surprising. He is always good. LA VOOZA crawls with wee

minds screaming of the Brackett magic. Phoo. Ray Gallun is the finest mood writer sf has yet produced.

Nothing left to talk about except the letters and you know how dull they are. Everything is jumping at the Stamp. I don't think the poor, middle-aged girl can take criticism. Least she never answered the mild bit of joshing I sent her.

Afraid I can't get aroused over A. K. King's speculations. If we do find intelligent life on other planets, would it be fair or just to infest them with humanity? Why haven't the Saucers landed? Probably because they are a far superior race. Would you crawl through an exceedingly filthy barnyard when you could see what it was like from over the fence?

I see Joe Keogh finally got religion. "As long as man is Christian he will remain essentially the same; and when he isn't, he will no longer be man," he says. I say FISH-FASH-TOOTLEDYWO. The majority of mankind has never been Christian. Christianity is one of the big religions, but it isn't the biggest.

I agree that once Western Man is non-Christian, he will no longer be the same. But it will be a change for the better. Christianity can be best described as a two thousand-year experiment in false logic. Communism is bad, because it denies the dignity of the individual, but is Christianity any better? It has tried desperately to deny the existence of sex. As a result, the majority of civilized people are jibbering messes of frustrations. Joe, did you ever feel sorry for a dog living in a large city? A dog is all animal and all hunter, yet he is denied everything his instincts cry out for, he cannot run, he cannot bark, he cannot hunt, he cannot eat good raw meat; he just cannot act as a dog must act if he wishes to be happy.

Well, I feel sorry for you Christians. You are also animals, just as all men are animals. If you don't believe me, page through a high school biology book. Your religion forbids you to do all the things you were meant to do. You cannot kill, you cannot take what you want, you cannot mate when nature tells you to. You are like a dog in a city. If you act as a normal animal of your species should act, your Master will whip you. Fie.

I have just read my letter. Vehement little guy, aren't I? I wrote that thing in a moment of high good feeling.

I do so love to bruise tender sensitivities. You know, Jack, it is great fun to be a bigot if you don't take yourself seriously. Of course, I don't believe any of the rubbish I rave about. To me, all men are equal in their worthlessness.

Ah me, I see you gleefully included that wee bit about you not having the guts to print my letter. It is a mighty old trick, but it works every time. Insult an editor's intestinal fortitude, and he will take pains to avenge himself by snipping only the very censorable bits from your letter. Jack is sitting back in his chair now, content and pleased with himself for making a fool of me. However, that was my plan and he fell right into my trap, so I'm sitting here smirking.

Fandom is nice, but it helps if you also have a job, something I have been minus for almost a year. I look down at my concave belly and am painfully aware that you can't earn a living in Fandom. Therefore, this is the last fan letter I shall ever write. Do I hear cheers and peals of joyous relief? Perhaps. . . .

It has been fun. Often my best lines have been cut out, but as I patiently tried to explain to Baby Bobby McElroy; distortion is the price of egoboo.

So, good-by, Fandom. If my tart words have caused you pain, I apologize. If I ever said anything that made you laugh; the sound of your laughter is the greatest possible reward.

Give illos to (1) John Courtois for purely mercenary reasons, I want an illo and to hell with modesty; (2) Jean Mackintosh for being a poet and a lady. What she has said is worth saying and she says it so very well; (3) Don Wegars for being quite amusing in a feeble sort of way.

au revoir,

John Courtois

THE WORLD OF ART

1590 California St.,
San Francisco, Calif.

Dear Editor,

Just finished the fall ish and feel that compliments are due. Oh, PS is getting better all the time. Each issue seems to be an improvement over the one before. I (personally) feel that one of the biggest improvements is your use of artist Kelly Freas' work, particularly on the covers. Your covers used to be just (and only) that, they covered the mag, and evidently that was considered sufficient.

I agree with Carol McKinney, in that the May issue of PS was the first I can remember of ever having the outside of the mag interest me like the inside does. And in my estimation the Fall cover is even better. Why don't you get some of Freas black-and-whites that are a little more up to par with what he can do in that field, humm?

Now for the stories:

THE GEISHA MEMORY

Not extraordinary, but well written and good reading.

JUPITER'S JOKE

I love humorous sf, but this, well, it impressed me as just not quite getting there. In short, a wee bit strained.

DOWN WENT MCGINTY

I liked it.

PHONE ME IN CENTRAL PARK

GAIAAAAAAAAAAAAA. . . Oh, Editor, where did you ever get that revolutionary plot?

HEX ON HAX

It would have been a real swell story without that illo. Kind of ruined it a little to see the statue stepping off the pedestal before I even started reading the thing.

THE VIOLATORS/THE PLUTO LAMP

Not earth-shaking but both enjoyable.

THE TIME-TECHS OF KRA

Ah, now we come to the novel. I won't say I didn't enjoy reading it cause I did. BUT, I for one, am getting awfully */#*.-*** sick of these time-variation plots. Just twist time around a little, put a different background on it, change the names of the characters, and there you have it, same old plot; suitable for re-use, if necessary, by doing the same thing all over again. Oh sure, if it's a good word juggler doing the honors it's readable, but it's like eating chili every day; you may like chili but it can get ver-ry boring.

AND NOW (ta-tra-ta-ta-la-ta-ta-ta) LA VIZ

Mittelbuscher: you have artistry confused with draftsmanship. Freas is every bit as good as Finlay; from the viewpoint of design, better. However it's like trying to compare Michaelangelo with Picasso; one is not better than the other, the two are different. So it is with Freas and Finlay, both are exceptional, in their own field of art.

Clarke; You I Like.

Spilholz: I agree, everyone should read more than one zine, all of 'em if time and financial condition allow.

I see Courtois is spouting along as usual, just like a whale . . . THAR SHE BLOWS . . . the horrible thing about it is that most of the time you have to agree with him as he bumbles merrily along.

Passing thought: Walker is the type of . . . (word you wouldn't print anyway, even if I put it in) who makes you want to argue it even if you agree with what he says.

Williams: . . . "It isn't what Brad writes about or what he says, or even how he says it." No, it isn't any of those things, Marvin, you're perfectly right. It's just the fact that no matter WHAT Bradbury writes there's always a bunch of fanatics around to claim it as the greatest thing since evolution. Sure, Brad's a good writer, one of the top ones, but THE best? Oh, come off it, kids.

PAT SCOTT

NORTHERN DEFENDER

2 Dorine Crescent,
Toronto 16, Ontario

Dear Editor,

This is the first letter I've written to a fan magazine in ages. Well, four years, anyhow! I'm breaking my own rules by doing so, but I believe I should, under the circumstances. It's a case of national pride. I've noticed that in the past not too many of my fellow Canadians write in to your mag, or any other for that matter.

In the Fall ish, I noticed this fellow Clarke's letter. I'm glad he's written in, but I would like to know where he gets the idea he's an authority on sex. (They tell me that is an ugly word. I don't believe it!) I'm no authority on the subject, but I guess I know as much about the emotional, psychological, and physical relationships as any layman can be expected to, and I'd think twice before I'd make a statement about it that was quite so positive.

It's a pity that one of the few Canadians that do write, spends his time dealing with a topic that has caused too d . . . n'd much controversy among the fen anyhow.

Now that that's off my chest, on to more pleasant topics. The stories, and such stories. Not the best stories I've read, granted, but good, real good. Well up to PLANET'S high standards.

(1) THE GEISHA MEMORY—This one I give top rating, for what my opinion's worth. It just goes to show how suspicious people can be about the above mentioned topic, when actually their fears are quite unfounded and explained quite easily. Marks knows the workings of the human mind pretty well.

(2) THE VIOLATOR—Cute and very true. Shows how hard people will fight truth in order to protect an established belief. Very, very true.

(3) THE TIME-TECHS OF KRA—This I liked, with its scientific explanation of the Time-Net and all. I most certainly hope Mr. Sheridan makes up his mind soon, though. Are we a superior race (species) or a collection of controlled puppets? He doesn't seem to be sure.

(4) PHONE ME IN CENTRAL PARK—Nice, but watch out for the rush to have names changed to ZZZZZZZZZXW.

(5) THE REST—Good, as is usual for PLANET, but not exceptional.

WHOOOPS—I forgot DOWN WENT MCGINTY

PLANET STORIES

—Takes one man to make people move. This shows it. Rate this as No. 5.

Sincerely,

KENNETH FROST

THE BARK-BITE

1790 Santa Barbara Dr.
Dunedin, Florida

Dear Ed,

Just discovered the latest ish of PS yesterday and so far I've read all but two stories. Haven't much time since we arrived at our new house here in Florida. PHONE ME IN CENTRAL PARK was the best of the ones I've read. I guess I liked the idea, although the explanation about the Index was a little slinky.

Sheekley's yarn was a bit obvious about half way thru the thing. His characterization was putrid. I couldn't decide which side I was on.

The best illo was Freas' for JUPITER'S JOKE. Last illo anybody'd like would be the one by Eberle for Binder's trite piece.

Now to the VIZI. First to Paul Mittelbuscher. . . . He errs when he says I err about Freas not becoming as popular as Finlay. He will become more popular because Freas is master of the delicate technique of simplicity in his art, while Finlay is master of the delicate technique of complexity. The fans, being of the type of mind of your and Keogh's mind, will gradually get sick of something too complex and change to liking something more simple. (Now to read back and see what I said.)

Oh, I know you'll argue this over, but to no avail, for all intelligent people are on my side.

And I'll laugh at Keogh all I want. I'm not afraid of how many letters he can write. I'll unsleath my Remington Noiseless and defend myself.

And now, MISTEr Clarke, are you trying to start

an uprising? Don't tell the readers that sex isn't here to stay! Even an intelligent (or semi-intelligent) conqueror knows better than to take away peoples' pleasures and past-times for fear of rebellion. Anyhow, what would everybody do in their spare time? What would PS covers look like? How would SF artists earn their living?

And YOU, Val Walker, start out by saying let's stop the sex discussions and then turn right around and give a lengthy spiel on the subject. You're trying to censor the one subject that is the basis of our favorite reading material! But you won't succeed, we're too free and proud to be dictated to.

Pic winners oughta be—

- 1) John (love that name) Courtois
- 2) Carol McKinney
- 3) Don Wegars

Poem! (Inspired by Mrs. Leek)

We snarl and growl,
We yell and fight,
But really our bark,
Is worse than our bite.

We may sound mean,
With our rants and rages,
But we welcome you,
To Planet's pages.

Last word before I sign off— The cover wasn't as good this time as it usually is. The coloring fell down badly. Oh, I guess Freas can't do every one to suit everybody. The size of the sword that gal is carrying is either slightly large or the girl's rather small. Of course I haven't read THE TIME-TECHS OF KRA yet either, so maybe that says something about it. Oh well.

we go,

JOHN FLETCHER

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